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This dissertation argues that *pragmatic empathy*, which is defined as the phase of communicative interaction where speakers respond as (an)other to common concerns, best articulates successful discursive encounters across cultural, political, and social differences. This project challenges the prevailing social constructionist paradigm that suggests that speakers must share cultural-linguistic conventions in order to communicate. By integrating the tenets of discursive interactionism—a causal description of language and communication—with the principles of North American Pragmatism, I argue that discursive competence with those we perceive as culturally, politically, or socially different precedes not through a sharing of signification practices but instead through the location and creation of meaning within the temporal limits of discursive encounters. Thus, pragmatic empathy names the limited nature of identification available to speakers in discursive exchanges across difference. The implications of this research are two-fold: First, it demonstrates how communication across difference does not require speakers to share languages or conventions prior to discourse; rather, understanding depends upon the speaker's ethical stance toward the other; Second, *pragmatic empathy* offers a pedagogical and epistemological model for engaging the diverse discourse practices of students in the heterogeneous college classrooms of an increasingly globalized academy.

(AN)OTHER WAY: PRAGMATIC EMPATHY AS RESPONSE TO DISCURSIVE
CONFLICT

by

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For Tibebu - My son, there is (an)other way.

APPROVAL PAGE

This Dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of
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PREFACE

As a graduate student in the fall of 2008 I taught Ismael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* in accordance with the University's All Freshman- Read program. The memoir traces Beah's struggles as a child soldier forced to fight during Sierra Leone's civil war, to his rehabilitation in a Unicef camp for former child soldiers, and finally to his arrival in New York and the beginning of a new life as a human rights advocate. Given the growing public interest in global human rights abuses and the narrative's coming of age sensibilities, it seemed a natural choice as the All Freshman-Read text. Since one of the goals of the All Freshman-Read is to encourage campus wide discussion, instructors teaching the text worked together to create discussion questions that not only brought out the central themes and ideas of Beah's memoirs but also questions relevant to discussions across the disciplines.

The role empathy plays in the reception of texts like Beah's became one of the central themes for campus-wide discussion. The questions developed around the issue of empathy included: "How might students respond to Beah's memoir given their own cultural-linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds?" And, "Are American university students ethically bound to speak up for the other?" And, if so, "How do we use empathy as a method for correctly interpreting the voice of the other for who we claim to authentically speak?" Instructors from across the disciplines found the questions concerning empathy to be provocative and relevant, especially given the suspicions circling Beah's authority to speak as a former child soldier.

In late 2007, the Australian based newspaper *Weekend Australian* reported that a number of details in Beah's account seemed fraudulent. The most significant alleged inaccuracy involved the timeline of events Beah constructed. In the memoir Beah describes a 1993 rebel attack on his village; however, the majority of villagers that the reporters from the *Australian* interviewed stated that the attack Beah describes occurred in 1995. This discrepancy is significant because if the later date is accurate it drastically changes the amount of time Beah was forced to serve as a child soldier. Records show that Unicef chose Beah to attend their rehabilitation camp in January of 1996; therefore, if the attacks Beah states occurred in 1993 actually occurred two years later in 1995, Beah's conscripted service only lasted around three months not three years as he claims in the memoir.

The *Australian's* investigation into the veracity of Beah's claims set off a maelstrom of public responses from Beah's supporters and detractors alike. The situation was reminiscent of the events surrounding a similar controversy: James Frey's supposed memoir *A Million Little Pieces*. As many remember, Frey's "memoir" became a *New York Times* bestseller and Oprah welcomed him onto her show as a hero to those looking to find solace in another's tale of overcoming addictions to drugs and alcohol. A few weeks later, after Oprah publically chided those questioning the truthfulness of Frey's account, incontrovertible evidence and a confession on the part of Frey brought to light the fictitious nature of the memoir. Frey returned to Oprah's show only to be shamed on national television, and Oprah bemoaned the lack of oversight on the part of the publishers for not fact-checking the author's account and for not promoting the text as a

work of fiction. Maureen Dowd, in an editorial piece for the *New York Times*, wrote of the televised exchange, “It was a huge relief, after our long national slide into untruth and no consequences, into Swift boating and swift bucks, into W.’s delusion and denial, to see the Empress of Empathy icily hold someone accountable for lying and conning – and embarrassing her” (“Oprah’s”). For Dowd, and countless other media personalities, Oprah’s confrontation with Frey represented a commitment to the “truth” and a defense of those who had read Frey’s text and empathized with the narrator’s experience.

While the controversy surrounding Beah’s text did not receive the same type of publicity as the Frey-Oprah confrontation, it nonetheless caused those of us teaching the text to take pause and consider the role “truth” plays in the formation of empathy, the contemporary definition of which is the “the vicarious and spontaneous sharing of affect with the other.” If students read Beah’s memoir and found they responded empathetically to the text and the narrator, what would happen if students learned that the narrator embellished his claims, or worse, lied altogether? How would falsehoods perpetuated by Beah reshape the students’ perception of empathetic responses?

At the time, these questions seemed incredibly important and complex, but now, a few years removed from the situation and committed to the principles of *discursive interactionism*—a theoretical orientation toward communication that views utterances as causally indicative rather than representational—I no longer find these questions relevant to discussions of empathy. Instead, when I hear someone speak about the veracity of another’s narrative, I am inclined to ask, “Given our theoretical adherence to poststructuralist thinking, how would one determine if what the other spoke was true?”

The prevailing answer to that question is “we can’t,” especially since our contemporary definitions of *meaning* suggest that all knowledge is idiosyncratic and determined by the cultural-linguistic systems to which we belong.

However, since I no longer believe that “cultures” or “languages” are real, I am no longer bound to definitions of empathy that conflate the experience of intersubjective meaning with the interpretation of another’s “language.” If every person, all the time, speaks in their own idiolect then empathy occurs serendipitously. In other words, empathy is the result of mere chance, of two idiolects being similar enough for interlocutors to notice similarities between their world and the others, but with no available means to deliberately recreate those conditions. So while people share a *desire* “to know that they know the other,” they still lack a critical vocabulary and methodology that would make these desires a reality. And, as the world continues to shrink, each of us is further implicated in the lives of others; therefore, it seems crucial to develop a method of inquiry that allows for descriptions of shared meaning.

This project begins the work of developing such a method.

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CHAPTER I

INTERACTIONIST RHETORICAL THEORY AND GLOBAL EMPATHY

“The most important question facing humanity is this,” Jeremy Rifkin contends in his latest work *The Empathic Civilization*, “Can we reach global empathy in time to avoid the collapse of civilization and save the Earth?” (3). Rifkin’s uses the term empathy, as most do, to mean the “deep emotional sharing of that other person’s state, accompanied by a cognitive assessment of the others’ present condition, and followed by an affective and engaged response to attend to their needs and help ameliorate their suffering” (13).¹ The ideal function of empathy is *intersubjectivity*—the sharing of meaning between people, and Rifkin contends that intersubjectivity is a “central human quality” that provides a means for avoiding conflict, and conflicts, given the Earth’s depleting resources, are bound to increase. Avoiding an era of continual war Rifkin concludes, will only “be by concerted action that establishes a collective sense of affiliation” (616). In other words, global empathy, at least in part, depends upon rhetoric because as Kenneth Burke argues determining the communication practices that encourage others to cooperate as a result of perceived affiliations is the central aim of rhetorical appeals.

Since Aristotle, the guiding, general definition of rhetoric has been a speaker’s *ability* to discover the available means of persuasion in a given context. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke argues that the key term for contemporary rhetorical study

should be *identification*, a speaker's communicative ability to affect the other's perception of the world as to align her view and her interests with those of the speaker. Classical rhetoric, as Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (1990) note, emphasized the role of invention—the “means of persuasion”—but Burke emphasized the speaker's “ability” to first access those means by determining, prior to discourse, how she might identify her needs with needs of the audience. Therefore, as Dennis Lynch points out, it is no surprise that empathy, when discussed as a type of rhetorical strategy is usually viewed as a particular type of identifying practice (“Rhetorics” 5).

What complicates Rifkin's project, and discussions of rhetorical empathy in general, particularly in the West, is the suspicious nature with which empathy is viewed. Affiliation with others often leads, as Susan Jarratt suggests, to “the problem of speaking for others” (“Beside” 110). As Lynch states, problems of empathy force us to examine the rhetorical implications of “speaking in someone else's voice” (“Rhetorics” 7). As both Jarratt and Lynch make clear, rhetorical practices that claim the ability to speak in the other's voice are often associated with “economic and cultural imperialism” (Jarratt 110). Of course, even those who would not identify as left-leaning academics are cautious to claim that empathy leads to an ability to speak on behalf of others. This was made apparent in the summer of 2009 as conservative pundits assailed President Barack Obama's for his nomination of Sonia Sotomayor's to the Supreme Court.

The public debate following President Obama's nomination of Sonia Sotomayor was particularly contentious. Conservative media outlets, still reeling from Barack Obama's election, jumped at the opportunity to criticize the role Obama's “empathy

standard” played in selecting a Supreme Court nominee. On several public occasions President Obama made clear that he viewed empathy—the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes and act accordingly— as an essential quality of a judge. Frothing with “activist-judge” rhetoric, critics of the president’s selection sharpened the focus of their attacks on comments made by Sotomayor during a 2001 speech at UC Berkeley that they believed demonstrated that the Left’s use of the term “empathy” simply denoted a type of “reverse” prejudice and bias. In discussing the role cultural identity plays in judicial decision-making Sotomayor made the following comment, “I hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn’t live that life” (*Wall Street Journal*). The exceedingly right-wing *Wall Street Journal* suggested that such comments flew in the face of Obama’s commitment to empathy because the demonstrated that Sotomayor’s allegiances would be with those whom she shared similar cultural values and experiences; rather than demonstrating a “universal” sense of empathy, Sotomayor was simply guilty of “identity politics,” which, as the *WSJ* asserts, raises the question “whether a judge with an avowed commitment to applying their own ‘experience’” would be disinclined to arguments made “by those not sharing that personal experience” (*Wall Street Journal*).

In a measured tone, conservative pundit David Brooks in a piece written for the *New York Times* offered a more nuanced critique of empathy that drew upon poststructuralist and social constructionist epistemologies which, since the “social turn,” have profoundly influenced how rhetoric and composition understands the notion of

shared meaning.² Emotions, like empathy, Brooks writes, “are an inherent part of decision-making” and as such “emotions are the processes we use to assign value to different possibilities.” These processes, however, and this is where Brooks’ social constructionist attitude—the belief that all knowing derives from particular languages, cultures, or histories—becomes clear, are made with “certain models in [our] heads,” that is, “these are models of how the world works and should work, which have been idiosyncratically ingrained by genes, culture, education, parents, and events. These models shape the way judges perceive the world” (*New York Times*). Therefore, Brooks concludes that using empathy as a hermeneutic for jurisprudence is problematic because empathy, like any interpretive scheme, is idiosyncratic and derives from a person’s particular adaptation of a specific cultural-linguistic heritage. In other words, when people claim to empathize with the other and demonstrate these commitments through discourse, their “empathetic” responses tell us more about the schemes shaping their view of the world than these responses tell us about the other’s view of the world. While Brooks’ does not use such language, his short article subtly implies that language, in this case judicial language, and reality, the “way things really are,” are ontologically distinct. This distinction implies that the affective dimension of empathetic responses, our embodied and thereby “real” emotional responses to the other are analyzable apart from the cognitive dimension, our deliberate use of language to describe these empathetic responses.

Language vs. Reality: The Push Toward Social Construction

“For the most part,” Anis Bawarshi contends, rhetoric and composition studies “accepted and perpetuated the subject/object, internal/external Cartesian split that so dominates the Western epistemological tradition” (“Beyond” 69). In assuming that humans remain separated from the world and are only able to access experience through media like language and culture, scholars in the humanities, at least since Plato, have worked to understand the implications of these media on our representations of the world, which includes the representations of the others with whom we discourse. By understanding subjectivity to be constitutive of the agent’s physical embodied experiences in the material world because it represents those experiences through mediums like language or culture, the prevailing theoretical models, as Stephen R. Yarbrough notes, assume that “an ontological, and therefore epistemological, difference exist between language and reality” (*After* 13).

Determining the implications of these distinctions between reality (the ways things are regardless of language) and the conceptual schemes that inform our representations of the world has been the work of poststructuralist theory for the last half-century. The poststructuralist critique of language, which preceded the “social turn” in rhetoric and composition studies, involved highlighting the ways in which none of these schemes can actually accomplish the tasks they are intended to complete: to represent the world “as it is.” However, as Derrida demonstrated, language can perform no such function because linguistic signs are arbitrary, and therefore, the relationship between signified and signifier is never stable; moreover, claims of stability call to our attention

the imposition of structures outside the text upon the text. Thus, the current trend in rhetorical theory and scholarship involves analysis of those structures that impose themselves upon communicative acts in an attempt to stabilize meaning, and the tracing of these structural developments.

Social constructionist theory views the structures to which Derrida refers as the products of socially authorized conventions through which members of a particular group or culture construct their view of the world. This position owes much to the work of Thomas Kuhn, Stanley Fish, and Richard Rorty, but through the work of theorists like Kenneth Bruffee and Karen Burke LeFevre, social constructionism found its ways into the disciplinary conversations of rhetoric and composition. In “Social Construction, Language, and Knowledge” Kenneth Bruffee claims “social constructionist work in composition is based on the assumption that writing is primarily a social act. A writer’s language originates with the community to which he or she belongs” (784). Given that language use originates with the communities to which speakers belong, the inventive nature of rhetoric is a “*dialectical process* in that the inventing individual(s) and the sociocultural are co-existing and mutually defining” (LeFevre 35), while the analytic dimension of rhetoric is akin to Richard Rorty’s description of critical thinking, which is “playing off alternatives against one another, rather than playing them off against criteria of rationality, much less against eternal verities” (“Hermeneutics” 11). Whether understood as Fish’s “interpretive communities,” Bruffee’s “discourse communities” or the “cultures” of social science, social constructionist thought claims that the meaning of our utterances lie not in their capacity to represent “truth” in the structuralist sense that

language corresponds to unmediated reality; rather, the meaning of an utterance lies in locating the social institution from which it came. That is, since language, or culture, or history, cannot fulfill their mediating function, the goal of rhetoric is to determine the social location from where utterances derive, and thereby understand the conditions that make other's utterance "true" with respect to their particular discourse conventions.

While social constructionist thinking provides a description of communication that does not depend upon correspondence theories of meaning and instead focuses on the contingent and ever-changing dynamics of human experience, it by no means abandons the notion that structures like language and culture are ontologically distinct from the material world. From a constructionist perspective the languages and cultures from which our discourse derives exist prior to our interactions with them, and will continue to exist regardless of our intervention. Moreover, these conceptual schemes vary not only from community to community, from culture to culture, but also from person to person.

Therefore, in order to claim that one can empathize with another, they must first somehow demonstrate the capacity to share the other's idiosyncratic conceptual scheme.³ Or, as Thomas Kent frames the problem, if all we know derives from communities in which we live then how would it be possible to share meaning with the other from a different community ("On the Very Idea" 426)? Furthermore, if we believe that things like "culture" are real in the sense that they exert force upon its members by shaping their discourse practices, then claims of shared meaning between interlocutors from different cultural-linguistic backgrounds implies that somehow they have come to share the other's

“culture,” and thereby denies the fundamental differences between people that the contemporary emphasis on cultural studies tries to protect.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest at this point that claims of empathy fail strictly based on the prevalent theoretical approaches to discourse that prevent us from theorizing how we might locate meaning that we can share. However, as mentioned earlier, claims of empathy are not only problematized not only by our current notions of meaning but also by the notion that the affective dimension of empathy and the cognitive dimension of empathy somehow exist discretely. In other words, the ontological distinctions we assume to exist between language and reality, culture and nature, are the same type of distinctions we encounter when discussing empathetic responses.

Empathy’s Dualistic Epistemology

Contemporary definitions of empathy rely upon the collaborative, albeit tenuous, relationship between the affective and cognitive dimensions of the process. As neuroscientists and social psychologists like C. Daniel Batson, Jean Decety, Martin Hoffman, Marco Iacobani, Carl Rogers, and Nathaniel Teich tell us, empathy is both an affective experience and a cognitive process that human beings are able to study as a result of our evolutionary capacity to use symbols. Jean Decety makes this clear when he writes, “empathy cannot be described only as a simple resonance of affect between self and other. It involves an explicit representation of the subjectivity of the other and a minimal self-other distinction” (“Social Cognitive” 264). Empathy when understood as purely affective remains speculative; there is no way to know if our responses to the

other's states are accurate. Therefore, the validation of one's empathetic response toward the other depends upon the cognitive assessment of the other's cultural, historical, and environmental conditions, assessments clarified and validated dialogically with the other.

As the above discussion of social constructionist thinking demonstrated, the notion that interlocutors can come to share meaning via dialogic encounters is nullified by the paradoxical claim of discourse communities. However, Decety's comments point to a problem that has long haunted rhetoricians, particular feminist scholars working to redefine the role emotional affect plays in rhetorical invention: "Is it possible to gain unmediated access to the embodied affective responses without cognitive, that is, cultural-linguistic assessment. Many feminist definitions of empathy fixate on the notion that the embodied experiences of affect that initiate the empathetic process will inevitably be distorted because in order to share meaning with the other we must interact with them discursively, and any interaction will necessarily draw upon our own peculiar scheme through which we view the world thereby distorting what the embodied responses mean.

This problem, I suggest, is simply another example of the affective, embodied, experience being subordinated in favor of cognitive descriptions of invention. That is to say, while we may, as many feminist and postcolonial scholars have, assert that empathy is part of the rhetorical process, these assertions often ring false because the standard practice of rhetoricians is to examine the affective dimension through the cognitive process of intentional discourse. As Mary Ann Cain, Ellen Quandahl, Lynn Worsham and countless other feminist scholars note, emotions, like any other conceptual object (throughout this study I use "object" to mean the conceptual and material things to which

we fix out attention) are socially constructed through institutions. Therefore, to discuss our affective responses is to necessarily enter into the cognitive dimension. We might say, as we would of “language versus reality” or “culture versus nature,” that the affective dimension and the cognitive dimension of empathy are assumed to be ontologically distinct and therefore produce vastly disparate epistemologies. In fact, given poststructuralism’s insistence that speakers cannot access a pre-discursive self—all beliefs, attitudes, and ideas are the product of social interaction with others through discourses that exist regardless of our intervention—the affective dimension of human subjectivity is silent, hiding in the space between words and feelings. From this perspective, empathetic responses are genuine so long as they remain unspoken. We might never know when we connect at that deep emotional level with the other because these connections only exist in the silences.

The guiding assumption of my current project, however, is that we do want to share meaning with others, especially those with whom we differ greatly. Most of us believe, at some embodied level, that empathy is possible, but our critical language betrays these commitments. The goal of this study is to provide a description of empathy, which I believe is more accurately understood as intersubjective meaning, that avoids the pitfalls of constructionist thinking, and also allows the affective dimension of human experience to play a crucial role in the determination of meaning. In fact, not only do I believe that shared meaning with others is possible, I will argue that collaborative interaction is the epistemological imperative for an interactionist approach to rhetorical study. Discursive interactionism, Yarbrough writes, is a “development of pragmatism”

and “it is the view that the meaning of an intentional event, such as an utterance, is the product neither of its coherence with an already existent linguistic or cultural system of conventions, nor of its correspondence to an already existent set of ‘real’ things, nor of its mere effects upon its perceiver.” Rather, the meaning of an intentional event, like an utterance, “is the relation between the effects the agent expects the event to produce and the effects it actually does produce, so that meaning *continually emerges* as the agents interact” (“On ‘Getting It’” 2). Or, more simply put, if two interlocutors who did not speak the same language respond to a common object, a chair for example, then “finding out what ‘chair’ means, what a chair *is*, and what to do with a chair and with the word ‘chair’ are exactly the same” (*Inventive* 46). “There can be no chair,” Yarbrough concludes, “until interlocutors discursively interact with the chair as a ‘chair’” (46). The interactional, inferential process Yarbrough describes assumes that comprehension and shared meaning are part of the same causal process – interlocutors responding to similar stimuli in a shared world.

Instead of continuing to believe in the mediating function of language and culture, I am convinced that we should instead focus on the causal effects of discourse. That is, in order to share meaning with the other, rhetoricians need to abandon the notion that we can somehow *see through* the other’s eyes, and instead focus upon *seeing with the other*. In order to do this, however, we need to view discourse not as dependent upon abstract structures and antecedent meaning; rather, discourse names how we use marks, noises, and gestures to direct the other’s attention to objects in a shared world. This description of discourse, as we will see, derives from a number of rhetorical theorists, but has

recently been supported by the work of neuroscientists looking at the function of mirror neurons. Therefore, before I offer an interactionist definition of empathy, I first want to examine how mirror neuron research suggests that not only is interactionism's approach to discourse valid, but also more adequately corresponds with intrinsic human neurological function.

Mirror Neurons

The discovery of mirror neurons by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team of neuroscientists provide an occasion to re-think, as Marco Iacoboni suggests, absolutely everything about the human condition. For as long as human beings have recorded history, we have recorded stories of our capacity to understand and empathize with others in the world we share. And while cognitivists, phenomenologists, poets, and painters all inferred the human capacity to empathize and share meaning with others, "No one could begin to explain how it is that we know what others are doing, thinking and feeling" (Iacoboni, *Mirroring* 4). In 1988, however, Rizzolatti and his colleagues stumbled upon something that would offer invaluable insight into how human beings share meaning with others.

While working with primates, Rizzolatti's team discovered that the animals' brain activity, activity usually associated with "goal oriented action"—grasping a particular object, placing an object on a particular surface, moving an object to a particular location, and the like—increased when the primates *observed* another completing these same goal oriented actions. While it is common for animals to exhibit neurological activity to visual

stimuli just prior to use, the scientists did not expect to see increased neurological activity when the animals observed from a distance others completing activities with familiar objects. Rizzolatti's team referred to the neurons that "discharge to the simple presentation of food or of other interesting objects" as "canonical neurons" (Fogassi, and Gallese, "Neural" 15-16). Canonical neurons discharge when monkeys are presented with an object, or when the monkeys direct their attention toward an object of interest, an object that is not being manipulated by another sentient being. Canonical neurons do not, however, discharge as noticeably when scientists perform simple tasks in front of monkeys. In other words, canonical neurons fired when the primates oriented themselves to objects of interest, but did not fire when the actions of another sentient being attracted their attention.

Mirror neurons (often referred to F5 neurons because of the location they discharge in the brain) on the other hand, fire when a monkey observes "another individual performing a hand action in front of it" (16). Hand action refers to the scientist's manipulation of an object (a cup for example) with which the monkey is familiar in a similar fashion to how the monkey might interact with the object. Moreover, when scientists simply mimic tasks in front of the primates, "the response of mirror neurons is much weaker or absent" (21). That is to say, if a scientist mimes the picking up of a cup, mirror neurons did not fire with as much strength as when they observed the scientist *actually* picking up the cup. In other words, the monkeys did not recognize the scientist's miming as a familiar goal-action with a familiar object, and

therefore did not register the scientist's movements as similar to their own. The lack of real exigency determined the monkey's interpretation of the scientist's actions.

These discoveries led scientists to hypothesize that "mirror neurons may have a crucial role in *goal detection*, and therefore in *action understanding*" (21). In other words, the monkeys responded to the scientist performing the task *and* the object to which the task was directed. Mirror neurons, which fired weakly when the monkeys viewed acts of mimicry, fired strongly when they viewed another carry out a goal-oriented task directed toward an object. We might say, to use Donald Davidson's terms, that the monkey and the scientist triangulated upon the object of common cause, in this case the coffee cup, and consequently, at the most intrinsic, neurological level shared meaning emerged as the beings oriented themselves to each other and the objects of their shared world. As Iacobani summarizes, mirror neurons show "that we are not alone, but are biologically wired and evolutionarily designed to be deeply interconnected with one another" (*Mirroring* 267).

The implications of mirror neuron research on neuroscience is profound, but as Iacobani contends, these finding also challenge "the most dominant thinking about the mind – at least in Western culture" that the starting point of all thinking and all knowing is the solitary, private mind (261). Since Descartes famously stated, "*Cogito ergo sum*," Western thinking has located the genesis of thought and meaning in the subjectivity of the individual agent. As Iacobani notes, this philosophical position also influenced the underlying assumptions scientists traditionally held about the study of the brain. These assumptions, in part,

can be formulated as such: the cognitive agent or subject understands the objects of the world by using internal mental states that represent those objects of the world, and, by so doing, produces knowledge. These internal mental states represent the outer objects of the world in an inner mental world; thus these representations do not really depend on the objects they represent. (“Existential”440)

As Jacobani’s comments make clear, the assumptions that guide scientific research maintain the same dichotomist view of the world criticized by thinkers like Bawarshi, Davidson, Kent, and Yarbrough. Jacobani summarizes the outcome of this dichotomist view in the following way: “If I have access only to my own mind, which is a private entity that only I can access directly, how can I possibly understand the mind of other people? How can I possibly share the world with others, and how can they possibly share their own mental states with me?” (*Mirroring* 263).

Interestingly, Jacobani’s critique of the scientific community resonates with the above-mentioned theorists’ critiques of social constructionist thinking. Scientific thinking about the mind, Jacobonai argues, is atomistic, which “basically means that one assumes that the mind can process elements of the world independent of each other and the world they are in” (“Existential” 446). What emerges from the findings of mirror neuron research, however, “is the view of a human brain that needs a body to exist in the world of shared social norms in which meaning originates from being-in-the-world” (440). Of course, it is crucial to point out that Jacobani is not describing the “social norms” of constructionist thinking, which assume discourses “social norms” exist *a priori*; rather, Jacobani is pointing out that the neural patterns his team observed during their experiments suggests a “holistic stance toward contexts, actions, and intentions,”

which is to say, the meaning of objects emerges as people interact with objects and each other in a shared world (448).

The emerging scientific view of human subjectivity, Iacobani argues, is that the default state of human experience is not internal cognition, but external sociality. This new understanding of our neurobiology demonstrates the “interdependence between the self and other” in the making of meaning (*Mirroring* 265). This intersubjectivity, Iacobani concludes, “commits us to others” at the most basic biological levels. Iacobani is cautiously optimistic that mirror neuron research will help people reconsider the role empathy plays in developing intersubjective meaning. Neuroscience is demonstrating that sharing meaning with the other is not only possible, but, to some extent, built into or biology. Yet, as Iacobani points out, we typically do not see “true cross-cultural encounters” because these encounters are “made impossible by the influence of massive belief systems” (271). And, while Iacobani’s work does not explore the fuller implications of mirror neuron research on rhetoric and composition studies, his remarks remind us that holistic and interactional views of shared meaning are often stymied by the beliefs and theories that try to make “knowing” the other a function of flawed interpretive processes. Too much of our theoretical work continues the reification of the Other’s subjectivity, which is to say, in order for interpretive theories like deconstruction or social construction to work, the Other must remain static at least long enough for the self to trace the antecedent structures that imbue the Other’s discourse with meaning. While postcolonial theorists encourage interlocutors to see the Other’s subjectivity as dynamic and contingent as the self, this awareness simply leads to a new interpretive problem. If

everyone's utterances derive from idiosyncratic applications of ever-changing social structures, which determine a person's communicative practices, then it is impossible to claim with even the slightest sense of certainty that two people from different backgrounds could share meaning with each other about objects in the world.

Mirror neuron research, however, suggests that shared meaning emerges as a result of difference, two or more sentient beings interacting with objects in a shared world with exigencies at stake. Sharing the same massive belief systems or socially constructed conceptual schemes as the other is not a prerequisite for intersubjective meaning. In fact, as Rizzolatti's research shows, being a member of the same species might not even be a prerequisite. Moreover, those neurological functions associated with mirroring and empathy do not fire when the subjects are left to themselves. When the primate interacted with the cup privately, his mirror neurons remained dormant; however, when that same primate noticed the other, in this case the scientist, interacting with the same familiar cup, the primate's mirror neurons fired. Mirror neuron research is demonstrating the contention held by interactionists, like Yarbrough, who argue that communication—the use of marks, noises, and gestures we use to direct the other's attention—“is motivated by the perception of differences, by disparities between the responses that we expect to our utterances and the actual responses we receive” (*After 9*). So, as in the case of the monkey and the scientist, as in all cases of communicative interaction, meaning emerges not because interlocutors create *a priori* identifications or somehow come to share the same schemes about the world; rather, intersubjective meaning emerges because of our differences.

Pragmatic Empathy and Interactionist Rhetorical Theory

Rhetoric and composition studies have already been introduced to the notions of shared meaning as *emergent intersubjectivity* that mirror neuron research supports through the work Donald Davidson, Thomas Kent, Anis Bawarshi, Mathew Snead, Kevin J. Porter, and most notably, Stephen R. Yarbrough, who refers to the view that discursive practices produce intersubjective meaning as *discursive interactionist theory*.

Interactionism receives little attention from the field of rhetoric and composition because of the provocative nature its major tenets. The rest of this project will explore the implications of this theory for a reconsideration of what it means to empathize with the other, but in order to extend the work of interactionism, which my theory of *pragmatic empathy* intends to do, I need to first provide an outline of the genesis of my thinking, that is, of how my reading of interactionist theory motivates the development of my current project. For the sake of clarity, then, I will conclude this introduction by offering a brief summary of interactionism's major theoretical tenets and how those tenets helped me to arrive at the thesis of this project: *pragmatic empathy* names the methodological imperative of interactionism, and provides a means of viewing discursive interactions that 1) allows for the emergence of intersubjective meaning, and 2) allows speakers to remain distinct, that is, to share meaning without relinquishing their agency or losing their subjectivity. Pragmatic empathy suggests that the intersubjective meaning that emerges as a result of discursive interaction is dependent upon speakers viewing their communicative acts as contingent, mutable, temporally bound, and dependent upon the collaborative, that is coordinated, interaction of at least two interlocutors. As my use of

methodology suggests, pragmatic empathy does not assert a specific epistemology; rather, pragmatic empathy names the orientation interlocutors assume in order for discursive interactions to achieve their ends, which I understand to be the continually emergent process of collaborative meaning making, or, for the sake of brevity, *understanding*.

Moreover, this project offers pragmatic empathy as a methodological imperative because too often the work of interactionism is dismissed as difficult, impenetrable, and too radical to be of use in the work of contemporary rhetorical scholarship. However, given discursive interactionism's insistence on collaboration and given that increasing globalization creates situations in which communicative encounters with the other are unavoidable, I believe that an interactionist rhetorical theory is not only applicable to contemporary problems of "communication across difference," but interactionism also offers hope that we might be able to articulate a theory of discourse that demonstrates the veracity of shared meaning. By offering a methodology, a type of practice and orientation toward discourse, I hope that the students and teachers of rhetoric concerned with the communication problems associated with difference will find discursive interactionism a useable theory that allows for the continued belief that intersubjective meaning is possible.

Finally, this project provides an answer to Rifkin's problem, "how do we achieve global empathy?" The answer is counterintuitive and perhaps provocative: we don't, can't, and shouldn't attempt to *achieve empathy* because this statement implies that in order for understanding to occur interlocutors must somehow use language to bridge the

metaphysical gaps assumed to exist between speakers. In its contemporary usage, empathy names a discrete rhetorical strategy that seeks to bridge these gaps between speakers through appeals of *pathos*. As I argue though, empathy, or rather, intersubjective meaning is not a discrete rhetorical strategy but *a characteristic of knowledge and its production*. Thus, to claim understanding with those whom we differ *implies pragmatic empathy*. Therefore, it seems to me that discursive conflicts arise not because we cannot achieve intersubjective meaning with the other but because conflicts are typically the result of ignoring the other with whom we can share. This project is an attempt, then, to make clear that those moments when understanding eludes interlocutors does not demonstrate the fatal flaw Derrida suggested lay at the heart of communication; rather, understanding, like everything else we do in the world, requires deliberate, reflective engagement, which is to say, work. This project attempts to provide a definition of communication that makes this work possible.

The method I propose develops primarily from the ideas of Donald Davidson; the work of North American Pragmatists C.S. Peirce, George Herbert Mead, Jane Addams, William James, John Dewey; contemporary pragmatists who also happen to identify themselves as rhetoric and composition scholars, namely, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, Kate Ronald, Hephzibah Roskelly, William C. Jones, Keith Gilyard, and Robert Danisch; and discursive interactionist theorists of Stephen R. Yarbrough. Together, these thinkers have helped me construct my argument by changing my thinking about the nature of points of communicative interaction, and I want to conclude this chapter by summarizing those points as they provide the foundation for this project's argument.

Triangulation, Discourse, and Affective/Cognitive Erasure

First, my work depends upon the acceptance of perhaps Donald Davidson's most radical claim concerning communication—"there is no such thing as language." This is not to say that interlocutors do not use marks, noises, or gestures to communicate, but that "there is no such thing as language apart from the sounds and marks people make and the habits and expectations that go with them.... There is no additional entity we possess in common any more than there is an ear we share when I lend you an ear" (*Truth* 131). Davidson's point is clear, "language" is a description we apply to our acts of communication, but is not a thing unto itself that exists regardless of human intervention. Therefore, the corollary point is also true; if language does not exist as an ontologically distinct entity then it cannot function as a medium through which we experience the world. Instead, Davidson prefers to think about language in terms of sensory organs. For example he writes, "We do not see the world through language any more than we see the world through our eyes. We don't see *through* our eyes but *with* them," therefore, language, like other organs, helps us "come into direct contact with our environment;" organs "are not intermediaries, screens, media, or windows" (130, 131). "Language" Davidson concludes, "is not something that comes between us and reality; it can't come between, since it is part of us" (133). For Davidson, discursive actions are tools that interact with the physical environment and therefore maintain no ontological distinction from other objects with which we interact, or as Yarbrough states, "there is no difference between the way I understand...this desk at which I sit, and the way I understand these marks with which I write about this desk," (*Inventive* 14). We understand discourse as we

understand other things, “through the inference of causes from their effects” (24). Given that there is no difference between “words” and “things,” “language” and “reality,” *discourse* simply refers to the marks, noises and gestures we use to direct the other’s attention toward the objects of common cause, and as Yarbrough makes clear, discourse “*is* the human mode of interacting with an environment, and environment *includes* things and people and the marks and noises they make to affect one another” (14). Throughout the rest of this study, then, I use the term to “discourse” to signify the interactionist understanding of communication, and refer to “language” only as a means to draw attention to contemporary theoretical positions that continue to rely upon the distinction between words and things.

Davidson’s notion of *triangulation* (a concept explored in great length throughout this study) provides rhetoric and composition with a description of how intersubjectivity emerges via discursive interaction. As Stephen R. Yarbrough points out, Donald Davidson’s notion of *triangulation* is essentially an inferential process in which interlocutors attempt to “affect the other creature’s response” to a common object. As we will see, Davidson offers an inferential means of sharing meaning with the other; discursive competence is not dependent upon interlocutors sharing the same language, culture, or conventions. What is required for speakers to share meaning is an object of discourse toward which they direct each other’s attention, precisely the same conditions from which Iacobani claims mirroring occurs. Thus, Davidson’s theory of triangulation offers a minimal theory of discourse; a theory in which understanding the other does not depend on the sharing of “massive beliefs,” or conceptual schemes like language and

culture, but instead understands shared meaning as an intersubjective, holistic, and unitary process of interaction.

If discourse names the available tools with which interlocutors can direct the other's attention then Davidson's notion of *triangulation* explains how the uses of these tools become meaningful. Davidson calls the intentionally discursive and interactive process of at least two interlocutors *triangulation*. I will not rehash the interpretations of triangulation made by Kent, Yarbrough, and Bawarshi, which emphasize the mutually conditioning nature of triangulated discourse— "the response, counter-response of (minimally) two interlocutors to a resistant third object that both human interlocutors identify as the 'common cause' or their respective responses" (Yarbrough, "On 'Getting It'" 4)—rather, I want to emphasize Davidson's claim that the mutually conditioning discourse of *triangulation* explains how interlocutors hold *any* propositional belief. *Triangulation*, therefore, not only refers to the process through which the meaning of those objects of discourse we typically view as "social" (the way we order food, or the kinds of things we believe are appropriate to say to children, or the rules of a particular game) emerge, but as Davidson contends, triangulation also explains how those propositional beliefs typically associated with inner-subjectivity of the self emerge during triangulated discourse.

At the end of his essay "The Second Person" Davidson writes this about triangulation:

The considerations I have put forward do not apply to language only; they apply equally to thought in general. Belief, intention, and the other propositional attitudes are all social in that they are states a creature cannot

be in without having the concept of intersubjective truth, and this is a concept one cannot have without sharing, and knowing that one shares, a world, and a way of thinking about the world with someone else.
(*Subjective* 121)

Davidson's comments should not be taken as a form of Wittgenstein's "language games" that suggests the limits of our language are thereby the limits of our world(view).⁴

Instead, Davidson explains that without triangulation there would be no way for a person to determine what objects were impinging on her senses. A person responds to the objects of attention in differential ways, but as Davidson states, this person would have not the grounds upon which to state the location of the object affecting her experience at a particular moment, no way to *triangulate* the location of the stimuli in the world.

Triangulation provides the means through which a person might locate the object affecting her responses. Davidson clearly explains this concept when he writes, "The sharing of responses to stimuli found similar allows an interpersonal element to emerge: creatures that share responses can correlate each other's responses with what they are responses to" (*Truth* 140). Davidson's notion of triangulation not only erases the "boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally," but triangulation also erases the need to assume an ontological distinction exists between the affective and cognitive dimensions of thought. This distinction is crucial to any reconsiderations of what it means to empathize with the other because the guiding view maintains that affective response to the other cannot be adequately translated through cognitive language use. Or, as Lynch contends, to empathize is to "presuppose a transparency to one another that does not, finally, exist. We simply cannot

know the fullness of someone else's experiences and understandings," and we cannot know the other because rendering the affective through language irrevocably alters the experience for all parties involved.

I, too, would agree that discourse alters experiences *and* environments, but this does not preclude us from sharing meaning with each other: it simply suggests that our dependence upon notions like language, including Chomsky's notion that affective experiences are governed by an internal syntax and grammar, might stifle our efforts to understand others because we always assume problems of translation will arise (*Rules and Representation*). In simpler terms, the prevalent assumption is that our affective responses "speak" a different language than the languages we cognitively develop, and therefore empathetic responses are betrayed by problems of translation. The problem some theorists find with empathy is that our rendering of affective responses through language does not adequately represent what a person experiences internally in the empathetic moment. This problem, as Yarbrough points out in *After Rhetoric*, is simply another version of the assumption that successful communication depends upon speakers coming to share the same meaning about the same objects through the same linguistic structures (172-173). However, this is not the definition of successful understanding promoted by discursive interactionism. For interactionist, the understanding that emerges through triangulation is defined by interlocutors' responses to the other's discourse in the manner the other intended.

To be clear, though, triangulation does not result in interlocutors collaboratively "naming" or "creating" the objects in their world. This is a constructionist notion.

Instead, discourse, because it is causally indicative, directs the other to notice our interactions with the object of our discourse, and vice versa. What emerges through triangulation, then, is a set of relationships: how each interlocutor interacts with the object of discourse, how each interlocutor uses marks, noises, and gestures to interact with the object, and how they use these same tools to direct the other's attention toward those relationships with the object of discourse. The intersubjective meaning that emerges from triangulation then is not dependent upon interlocutors sharing the same language, or even the sharing the same attitude or opinion toward the object of discourse. The intersubjective meaning that emerges during triangulation is the interlocutors' awareness of the conditions that inform the other's interactions with both the object of discourse and the other with whom they discourse. These conditions, however, are not stable. Intersubjective meaning continually emerges because interlocutors and the objects of their attention continually influence the discursive choices and thereby the conditions that make their marks, noises and gestures meaningful.

Intersubjective meaning names interlocutors' abilities to recognize and respond to the relationships formed through triangulation. "The set of these relations," Yarbrough writes,

what the object will come to *be* to the interlocutors, is unified by their common relationship with, or attitude toward the object. The signs they use during the interaction—their gestures, marks, or sounds—do not constitute the object, for the set of relations that the objects come to be for them is constituted *neither* prior to comprehending that the sign refers to the object, *nor* subsequently to comprehending that the sign refers to the object they have already perceived. Rather the constitution of the object, the interpretation of the signs they use to interact with it, and the comprehension of the relations between the object and the signs are one

and the same event. *In short, the mental events are identical with the physical events.* (“On ‘Getting It’ 5, emphasis added)

When applied to the problem of empathy, discursive interactionism offers a much different understanding of what it means to share affective and cognitive states with others. Rather than assuming that any intentional descriptive act directed toward our perceptions of the other’s emotional and physical state necessarily distorts our affective experience, discursive interactionism suggests that since all knowing is relational, purely affective responses are simply responses that have yet to coordinate with other objects and interlocutors. Moreover, since interactionism sees discourse as a unitary process, “emotions are not attached to or merely associated with but fully integrated with our purposeful activities” and thereby emotions, like all of our discursive tools, are intended to affect those objects with which we interact (*Inventive* 132).

A person’s initial affective response to another’s situation is of course strikingly different from what we might typically think of as a deliberative discursive act intended to direct the other’s attention. However, since my commitment to interactionism prevents me from claiming that internal affective responses are ontologically different from my deliberate, that is “cognitive” discursive actions, I need to provide an answer to the question, “How does an interlocutor’s initial affective responses to the other’s state of being coordinate with the speaker’s intentional uses of discourse?” The answer to this question lies in interactionism’s pragmatic orientation toward belief. One of the central tenets of pragmatism, as Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly note, is the “relationship between belief and action, knowing and its consequences... an idea is defined by its

consequences” (“Untested” 619). Pragmatism, which William James makes clear functions as a method of inquiry and not an theory unto itself, sees the “meaning” of inquiry as identifying the effects produced by the objects of inquiry because these effects determine what the object means for us. The need for inquiry, C.S. Peirce argues, only arises when our habitual responses to situations do not provide adequate solutions to current exigencies.

The realization that our habitual responses are inadequate to deal with a particular exigency arises in what Peirce calls the “irritation of doubt.” When our discursive actions do not produce the effects we intended and expected them to produce on the other, when our intentionally discursive tools are inadequate, all we have left are our affective responses, which registers as a kind of “doubt” signally that the relations we maintain with the objects of our attention are inadequate for addressing the needs of the discursive situation. While I agree with Peirce that our affective responses signal the inadequacy of our discursive habits, I am more inclined to argue that terms like “doubt” or “sadness” or “joy” only make sense once interlocutors reorganize their relations between each other and the objects of their attention. For example, the “dread” we feel when the phone rings late at night, corresponds to the discursive relationship we maintain with our aging parents in the hospital battling illness; however dread quickly changes to “relief” when we realize someone simply dialed the wrong number. The affective experience did not change. What changed are the relationships affecting our discourse. The initial affective response emerged because of our relationship to phone etiquette—people should not call other people late at night. Thus, the initial “irritation of doubt” occurred because many of

us do not have habitual responses to phones ringing in the middle of the night. The feeling of “dread” develops because we try to make some sense of this break in our habitus. For this relationship to hold, however, requires the person on the other end of the line to be the purveyor of bad news. When we realize that the person on the other end of the line is not a family member relaying bad news about our parents, our habitual responses to “dread” no longer hold relationally. That is, to interact with the news and the person on the other end as one experiencing dread would limit the possibility that intersubjective meaning would emerge since the person on the other end of the line would be unable to locate the cause of our responses.

“In short, emotions are the measure of an initial response to the resistance of things to our current beliefs about the situation in which we are engaged,” and as such once we change our orientation, when our discourse and the discourse of others directs us to notice different relationships, our affective responses make those changes as well (Yarbrough, *Inventive* 146). Affective responses signal to us that our discursive orientation toward others and objects are inadequate for the sharing of meaning. However, these responses are not different ontologically than our intentional discursive responses; they are simply a different phase of the same process. What we initially “feel” toward the other initiates further triangulation. Our affective responses signal to us the resistance between the objects and others with whom we discourse and our habitual responses to those conditions. From the perspective of interactionism, understanding develops through the unitary process of discursive triangulation; therefore, our affective discursive responses phase into our intentional discursive acts. Our feelings are not lost,

or mistranslated, or corrupted, or ignored, because of our discourse; they change, as does everything when it interacts with the environment.

Toward a Methodology of *Pragmatic Empathy*

I conclude this section by stating the aims of this study, which in many ways is intended to function as an introduction to the methodology implied by the epistemological aims of interactionist theory. In the work of the pragmatists, Davidson, and Yarbrough, I see a hope that as people we can determine the best courses of action and our discursive acts can help facilitate this process. Interactionism, as the above summary demonstrates, suggests that in order to “say what we mean and mean what we say” we must abandon many of poststructuralism’s notions of language, culture, and history that shape our current theoretical dispositions. This project’s goal is to articulate the methodology central to an interactionist approach to communication. Pragmatic empathy names this method. Moreover, pragmatic empathy not only provides an explanation of *how* intersubjective meaning emerges when interlocutors neither share the same language or culture, but pragmatic empathy also demonstrates *how* our intersubjective meaning emerges while keeping our differences and individuality intact. In other words, this project seeks to provide a method of inquiry for the communication problems facing a globalized world.

In order to make this approach to rhetorical studies clear, I have structured this project in the following way. In Chapter One, I outline the connections between empathy and Burke’s notion of rhetorical identification. Here, I suggest that while identification

provides the means by which rhetoric and composition typically enter into discussions of empathy and intersubjective meaning, identification offers no objective or verifiable means of explaining how meaning is shared. This problem, I argue, stems from Burke's social constructionist view of discourse, which assumes that all discourse derives from *a priori* institutions that both shape and inform our discursive acts. I then argue that interactionism challenges the constructionist view of language that Burke promotes, and provides the departure point for an alternative description of intersubjectivity, one that does not view identification as a prerequisite for shared meaning.

Chapter Two suggests that in order to share meaning with the other we must have beliefs that can in fact be shared. Here, drawing upon the North American pragmatists, I suggest that an interactionist understanding of belief is defined by our *commitments*. "Commitments" provides an alternative term for the troubled notion of "belief." I demonstrate that all "beliefs" are types of commitments—temporally bound, mutable, and environmentally contingent beliefs about our relationships toward the objects of discourse, which emerge through triangulation with others. Commitments are pragmatic, interactional, and necessarily intersubjective. That is, not only can commitments be shared, but they also only exist *in the sharing* of objects with others. I conclude this chapter by demonstrating—by means of a thorough articulation of Peirce's notion of the "irritation of doubt"—how the "crisis of commitments provides the impetus for triangulation.

In Chapter Three, I define pragmatic empathy as a response to Burke's constructionist methodology of identification. Here, I contend that while Burke's notion

of identification attempts to provide a description of how interlocutors share meaning with the other, he is unable to make a convincing argument because he continues to believe that language is a medium and that language is socially constructed. After illustrating the internal inconsistencies of social constructionism, I offer an extended definition of *pragmatic empathy*—interactionism’s methodological imperative.

Finally, I offer a few tentative remarks about the pedagogical implications of pragmatic empathy. Because the discursive relationships between objects and interlocutors that emerge during discursive triangulation are temporally and environmentally bound, any pedagogical application of interactionist theory needs to address these limitations. Moreover, I argue that deliberate discursive engagement that leads to shared meaning with the other is possible, but we must be able to identify, accurately, the others and objects that form the apexes of triangulation. In other words, pragmatic empathy is useful in the classroom insofar as it helps us understand that intersubjective meaning is a local and temporal phenomenon.

In many ways, this project is an attempt to give a method to the madness of interactionist theory. As the world continues to shrink and our encounters with difference increase, we need theories of discourse that will allow us to share meaning with others so that we avoid conflict and develop understanding. In the simplest terms, this project is an act of defiance against the cynicism of contemporary theory that says we can only know others on our own terms.

There are no “terms,” only people in a shared world that use marks, noises, and gestures to survive – a task best accomplished collaboratively.

NOTES

1. I use the term “affect” in the same fashion as The American Psychological Association, which defines affect as the experience of feeling or emotion and a key part of the process of an organism's interaction with stimuli. The word also refers sometimes to affect display, which is "a facial, vocal, or gestural behavior that serves as an indicator of affect" (*APA Dictionary of Psychology* 26).

2. Throughout this project my use of “social turn” will reflect rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary movement away from expressivist and process pedagogies and acceptance of theories of discourse that emphasized the socially constructed nature of both our communicative practices and our subjectivities. John Trimbur introduced the term “social turn” to a wider audience in his 1994 review of postprocess scholarship entitled “Taking the Social Turn: Teaching Writing Post-Process.”

3. “Conceptual Schemes,” Donald Davidson tells us, are “ways of organizing experience; they are systems or categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene” (*Essential* 196).

4. I use the term “world(view)” when referring to poststructuralist and social constructionist thinkers to highlight the theoretical implications of assuming all speakers orient themselves to the world differently, which implies that agents do not have

unmediated access to the world, only their perceptions of it, and do not share the same world, but has his or her own idiosyncratic mediated relationship they call “world.”

CHAPTER II

TOWARD *EMERGENT INTERSUBJECTIVE MEANING*

“A person starts to live when he can live outside himself.” Albert Einstein

“Belief, intention, and the other propositional attitudes are all social in that they are states a creature cannot be in without having the concept of intersubjective truth, and this is a concept one cannot have without sharing, and knowing that one shares, a world, and a way of thinking about the world with someone else.” Donald Davidson

Understanding Empathy

It goes without saying that rhetoric and composition sustains a tenuous relationship with notions of truth, and for many scholars and teachers of rhetoric, the post-structuralist project of questioning the efficacy of language resonates profoundly with their disciplinary tendency to recognize and critique discursive practices that promote overly simple notions of objectivity. Thus, when Jeremy Rifkin in *The Empathic Civilization* suggests that our continued existence and the planet’s well being depend upon our capacity to empathize with others, the rhetorician’s tendency is to remain skeptical, questioning how such a project would proceed, and whether such a project is even possible given our current understanding of intersubjectivity, culture, and discourse. Rifkin’s claim is particularly interesting given rhetoric’s historical association with

empathy through Burke's notion of *rhetorical identifications*—the relationships people and groups create through their use of symbols (language, art, culture, etc.) in order to share meaning. From a rhetorical perspective, Rifkin's claims about global empathy encourage a reconsideration of identification, rhetoric and composition's supposed conceptual equivalent. To understand the connections between empathy and identification, however, requires a brief summary of empathy as a concept and its traditional application in rhetoric and composition scholarship.

Empathy, traditionally understood as the capacity of human beings to vicariously share affect, remains a crucial topic of literary theory, particularly the psychoanalytic and phenomenological traditions which value inquiry into the affective dimension of interpretation. This relationship between literary study and empathy is rather self-evident, especially when examining the concept's historical roots. "Empathy" derives from the German word *Einfühlung*, a term coined in 1872, and key concept in German aesthetic perception theory (Reed, "The Antithetical Meaning" 7). As Rifkin points out, "*Einfühlung* relates to how observers project their own sensibilities onto an object of adoration or contemplation and is a way of explaining how one comes to appreciate and enjoy the beauty of, for example a work of art" (12). The appearance of empathy in the literature of psychology, however, stems, in part, from the word's alternative definitions, which as Evelyn Schwaber points out, suggest "to feel within" and to "indwell" (27). For psychologists, empathy provided an explanation for how therapists enter into the emotional and cognitive states of the patient in order to provide diagnosis. Wilhelm Dilthey conflated these various meanings of *Einfühlung* and began to use the term as a

way “to describe the mental processes by which one person enters into another’s being and comes to know how they feel and think” (Rifkin 12). Thus, empathy became not only a way to describe how therapists understood the psychological issues afflicting patients, but also provided a language for how human beings appear capable of understanding the actions and thoughts of others.

To empathize, then, names a process by which “humans come to know what others are thinking and feeling” (Baston 3). This “psychological process” Martin Hoffman explains, “makes a person have feelings that are more congruent with another’s situation than with his own situation” (qtd. in Rifkin 13). Hoffman implies that to empathize involves an individual understanding his or her cognitive and emotional responses from “within” the perceptive space of the other. As Joseph Lichtenberg points out, empathy demonstrates the human capacity for intersubjectivity – the ability to enter into another’s internal states of being (3). These qualities of empathy are summarized clearly when Suzanne Keen defines empathy as the “vicarious, spontaneous, sharing of affect” (207). The above mentioned scholars provide the theoretical scope of empathy – what empathy can supposedly accomplish – but there still remains the pragmatic question, which Scwaber asks when she writes, “But what does this mean, to place oneself *within* the experience of another in order to comprehend the inner reality of the other?” (27).

Louis Agosta offers “one possible answer” by suggesting that empathy “as a form of human understanding” forms something like Heidegger’s “hermeneutic circle” (45). Generally, the hermeneutic circle represents the “circularity” of human experience –

everything, always, exists in the realm of interpretation, or as Agosta writes, human lives “are composites consisting of many aspects that take their meaning from the whole of which they are a part and, in turn, lend meaning to that whole” (45). For Agosta, empathy exists, but its recognition is part of its genesis. In other words, to empathize is to interpret the experience of the other in light of our own experiences, and thereby empathy is a circular hermeneutic process. To empathize in order to share meaning with another requires, as Hoffman suggested above, allowing our interpretations of the other’s discursive acts condition both our affective response and proceeding utterances.

These interpretive capabilities exist, Reed argues, because our “communal discourse” is “flexible enough to accommodate individual differences and firm enough to withstand too much divergence” (10). Reed, in the same vein as rhetoricians like Kenneth Bruffee and Stanley Fish who embrace social construction, explains that communal discourses develop by “virtue of common cultural heritage and similar educational experiences; by virtue of common sharing of goals and assumptions, theories and works” (11). Consequently, people (and, especially for Reed, psychologists) are able to see the “written word” as a “vehicle of affective experiences, beliefs, associations, and fantasies.” Because “of the extensive similarity of experience represented by a sharing of theory and work, the word itself has an evocative potential”(11). Thus, “empathy occurs in an interpersonal setting between persons who remain aware of their separateness, yet in essence it is an intrapsychic phenomenon based on the human capacity to know another’s person’s inner experience from moment to moment” (Buie qtd. in Reed 12).

To social constructionists, then, the ability to empathize with the other exists as a function of already shared meaning: the particular linguistic, cultural, and historical conventions people share that allow them to share affective responses to given artifacts. However, this view of shared meaning implies that individuals are cognitively distinct from each other—that our views, experiences, and perceptions of the world are wholly different and unique. Simply put, according to constructionist theory, we empathize because we do not share the *same world*. Empathy allows us to momentarily share conceptions about object in the world, but the divisions between us, whether linguistic or cultural, ultimately define our existence.

In other words, empathy, as a key term for the social sciences, names a process by which people bridge the metaphysical gap that exists between them, and in constructing these bridges, which is the sharing of meaning demonstrated through similar affective responses, these metaphysical distances become evident. This, of course, is exactly the same position Burke holds when he discusses *rhetorical identification*, a supplementary concept necessary for persuasion, and the term most commonly invoked by rhetoricians concerning discussions of empathy. Burke, like the social scientists mentioned above, believes that shared meaning both illuminates our divisions and provides evidence for our affiliations. For, Burke, a rhetor's capacity to *identify* with the other stems from the sharing of communal conventions and symbolic systems; moreover, identification, like empathy, simultaneously marks moments of “consubstantiality” while reminding speakers of their irrefutable separation. We can understand what Burke calls

identification as a rhetorical version of the concept of empathy, and thereby the term through which rhetoricians may enter into Rifkin's global project.

Central to Rifkin's re-telling of human history through the lens of empathy is the notion of intersubjectivity—a quality central to Kenneth Burke's notion of identification, which serves to “re-tell” the story of rhetoric. In his now famous passage, Burke explains identification in the following way:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so. Here are the ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (20-21)

Rhetorical identifications, Burke contends, names what since Cicero has been understood as the primary goal of rhetorical study: understanding how to navigate partisan relationships in such a fashion as to serve the greater good.² Or, as Burke defines the purpose of rhetorical study, “put identification and division ambiguously together so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric” (25). Rhetorical identifications, like the definitions of empathy explained above, represent an attempt on the part of distinct individuals to share meaning with the other, to experience, in similar fashion, the world with someone else.

As Dennis A. Lynch points out, rhetoricians often reformulate questions of empathy, persuasion, and audience into questions of *identification*. Thereby, rhetoric scholars avoid the pitfalls created by discussions of affect, which often lead to mystical

and romantic appeals, and instead draw upon the work of Kenneth Burke who, Lynch contends, most clearly anticipated the “turn toward empathy,” evidenced through his redefinition of the aims of rhetoric in terms of identification: “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (*Rhetoric* 55). Yet, while Burke and, as Edward Schiappa suggests, the ancient rhetoricians, including Isocrates, believed that the ability to experience the world like another through empathy/identification was essential to effective persuasion, and cooperative action, these terms remain prone to criticism.

“Empathy used to be at the center, at the heart, of rhetorical studies,” Dennis Lynch points out, and it “used to name kinds of strategies (appeals to pity, compassion, sympathy, and empathy),” and also “served as a mode of invention (a speaker or writer imagines an audience’s response by imagining what really matters to them)” (5).

“Rhetoric,” Lynch summarizes, “cannot proceed without empathy—or if it does, it is sure to fail”; however, the notion of empathy is typically discussed within the context of *pathos*, deliberate appeals intended to elicit affective responses from an audience.

Rhetorical studies, with its historical and continued emphasis on understanding pathetic appeals, has much at stake, then, in Rifkin’s project of understanding how to share meaning in an ever-shrinking world in which differences are encountered more frequently. However, rhetoric and composition’s use of empathy as a strategy for communication is complicated by the postmodern suspicion of *intersubjectivity*, the notion that two or more individuals can share meaning about a particular object as a result of coordinated interaction.

Empathy, which necessarily requires intersubjectivity, remains a contentious term in postmodern philosophical thought because it challenges Cartesian dualism, the critical position foundational (irony intended) to postmodern thought. The “Cartesian split” assumes that division defines human existence. These divisions come in a number of forms: the interiority of the mind and the exteriority of the physical world; the division between self and other; and the division between nature and culture. Each of these divisions, to varying degrees, exists because our philosophical assumptions continue to derive from Platonic thinking: human beings *are* separated from the physical world and from each other; therefore, to “encounter” the world is to articulate the world through a particular idiom. To know the world is to *know a particular way to speak about the world*. Consequently, to empathize with the other *is to imagine one like the self in the world of which the self speaks*. That is, in the Platonic view, empathy requires that people share both similar idioms with which to speak about the world and similar experiences in the world upon which to draw their actions and utterances toward the other. Painting in broad strokes, then, it is reasonable to suggest that the critical tradition of the West developed with the assumption that all of us, all of the time, are able to experience the world and each other only through the lenses (language, culture, history, etc.) given to us. Achieving an epistemology based on empathy, as Rifkin wants to suggest with his project, requires an answer to a seemingly basic question: “how does shared meaning come about?” And, if shared meaning is possible, “how could it be recognized objectively, which is to say, in a fashion that validated the experiences, beliefs, and actions of all parties involved?”

The “social turn” in rhetoric and composition studies raises substantial challenges to claims of identification and empathetic response. Perelman and Obrecht-Tyteca were some of the first rhetoricians to articulate this suspicion. In *The New Rhetoric* they write, “the post-Cartesian concept of reason obliges us to make certain irrational elements intervene every time the object of knowledge is not self-evident” (3). These “irrational” interventions often include appeals to “suprarational sources of certitude such as the heart, grace, “Einfuehlung (empathy),” or “Bergsonian intuition”; however, Perelman and Obrechts-Tyteca contend that appeals of *pathos* are “completely artificial and contrary to the real processes of our thoughts” (3). Instead of expending energy summoning the mythical powers of empathy and grace, Perelman and Obrechts-Tyteca exhort rhetoricians to better understand the socio-economic and cultural-linguistic environments of their audience, which will allow for a better understanding of the identifications that are most persuasive. Without understanding and responding to the social conditions that determine an interlocutor’s possible discursive choices, “argumentation would be pointless and without result. For *all argumentation aims at gaining the adherence of minds, and, by this very fact assumes the existence of an intellectual contact*” (14).

Perelman and Obrechts-Tyteca’s comments anticipate Kenneth Bruffee’s social constructionist view of discourse, which Bruffee defines as the view that “writing [all communicative modalities] is primarily a social act,” because a “writer’s language originates with the community to which he or she belongs;” therefore, “We use language primarily to join communities we do not yet belong to and to cement our membership in communities we already belong to” (“Social Construction” 784). Or, in Burke’s terms,

communication makes our identifications, or lack there of, across perceived cultural, social, or historical differences clear. Communicate also strengthens existing identifications with those whom we share common interests. Thus, as Gretchen Flesser Moon points out, the general thrust of twentieth-century rhetorical study, thanks in large part to the importance of Burke's thinking and the influence of social constructionist theory, involves "returning the rhetor's attention to invention, and, at least implicitly, to the ethical dimension: the problem for rhetors in questions of value and judgment...is to find the common ground between rhetor and audience in attitudes and states of mind" ("The Pathos of *Pathos*" 34). In the most basic terms, if I. A. Richards is correct and rhetoric is "the study of misunderstanding and its remedies" then those remedies are located in the interpretive work associated with accessing and developing arguments in the idiom of the other's conceptual schemes.

Of course, as Rifkin alludes, the notion that individuals remain cognitively distinct and yet capable of sharing meaning through the translation of conceptual schemes represents an insurmountable problem for contemporary rhetorical theory with its predilection for postmodern critiques of culture, history, and language. As Diane Davis, Richard Coe, and countless other Burke scholars demonstrate, identification is Burke's humanist attempt to explain how speakers might negotiate the "originary divisiveness" that defines human existence through symbolic interaction intended to bridge the metaphysical and cultural-linguistic space between agents (Davis 128). These symbolic interactions are predicated upon, as Burke states, the ability of speakers to share enough linguistic and syntactical similarities in their discourse to identify themselves with the

needs of the other, demonstrated in the other's utterances. In this way, Burke writes, "belonging'...is rhetorical" (*Rhetoric* 28). That is, when we identify with the other, we have entered into the realm of the rhetorical because if "men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (22). However, as many contemporary Burke scholars point out, Burke's notion of rhetorical identification, which remains central to contemporary rhetorical theory, cannot avoid the inherent inconsistencies associated with appeals to language's representational capacity. In other words, it is questionable whether speakers have the capacity to demonstrate empathy through affective rhetorical appeals because such demonstrations imply that speaker's can in fact share the Other's conceptual schemes, a notion that flies in the face of contemporary theory's commitment to incommensurability.

The limitations of empathy as a viable means of initiating inventive strategies that address the needs of other's has most recently been taken up by scholars like Patricia Roberts-Miller and Kristie Fleckenstein. In her essay "The Tragic Limits of Compassionate Politics" Roberts-Miller suggests that not only are rhetorical appeals purporting claims of empathy self-indulgent—"the love that one feels for someone with whom one empathizes is a kind of self-love"—but these appeals often focus on "saving the individuals from the system [oppressive social institutions]" rather than programs of large-scale social amelioration (692,693). Both of these problems, Roberts-Miller argues, stem from a speaker's identification with the other, that is, speakers tend to act compassionately only when they identify the other as similar to the self and therefore the environmental forces impinging upon the other could, at least potentially, impinge upon

the self. Kristie Fleckenstein, in her essay “Once Again with Feeling,” a response to Roberts-Miller’s argument, accepts the premise that identification is potentially undermined by speakers’ hermeneutic tendency to interpret the other’s actions through the lens of the self; however, these tendencies do not negate the fact that people claim embodied, affective experiences of identification with others via empathy. Therefore issues of empathy and *pathos* need to be continually addressed in the theoretical discourse of rhetorical studies. In short, emotions are bound up in rhetorical acts, but as Fleckenstein, Roberts-Miller, Mary Ann Cain, Ellen Quandahl, Lynn Worsham, and countless other scholars note, emotions, from a rhetorical perspective, are constructed responses or *topoi*, determined by the cultural, linguistic, social, and historical conventions of particular discourse communities. Thus, discussions focusing on the rhetorical function of empathy, emotion, or any other appeal to *pathos*, are simultaneously conversations dealing with the extent to which speakers can effectively interpret, or “bridge the gap” between their socially constructed interpretive schemes and those interpretive schemes that shape the other’s rhetorical acts.

Rhetorical strategies drawing upon the language of empathy, as Nathaniel Teich points out, often use spatial metaphors to describe the empathetic process. Metaphorically, speakers traverse the metaphysical space between themselves and their audience, a description of empathy often used in psychiatric discourse from which rhetoric draws from heavily in its theorizing of affect. Teich suggests that psychologist Carl Rogers’ use of empathy when discussing “client-centered therapy,” which emphasizes an “active listening” that facilitates “attitude change” provides rhetoricians

with a useable definition of empathy because of Rogers' focus on conversations that lead to meaning making and sharing—a central rhetorical concern since Plato and Aristotle. Rogerian Rhetoric, as Teich and others make clear, emphasizes the importance empathy plays in interlocutors' interpretation of the other's discourse in order to determine the other's orientation to the discursive problem at hand.¹ Rogers like the rhetoricians mentioned above, often uses spatial metaphors to describe the empathetic process. Rogers sees empathy as the ability to “adopt the client's frame of reference” and “enter fully into the world of his feelings and personal meanings and see these as he does” (*On Becoming* 53). Doug Brent adapts this Rogerian concept of “entering into the other's world” for rhetoric and composition studies, writing, “Rather than simply imagining an isolated set of arguments for an opposing viewpoint, the write must imagine the entire worldview that allows those arguments to exist, that makes them valid for the other” (Brent “Rogerian”). Empathy, as a rhetorical concept, names the inventive process through which speakers develop appeals based upon their entering the “space” of the other, and through this intersubjectivity developing strategies that identify the other's needs with regards to particular discursive exigencies.

Empathy, though, as Rogers points out, is not a claim of “pure identification”—to lose the self over to the other (a continued concern of philosophers like Martin Buber and Immanuel Levinas) . Rather, “being empathetic is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition” (*A Way of Being* 140-141). Rogers, like Roberts-Miller, Fleckenstein, and

Perelman and Obrecht-Tyteca, is cautious not to oversimplify the affective dimensions and cognitive dimension of empathy. Martin Hoffman, like the aforementioned rhetoricians, sees empathy as a complex human-centered analytic, the “ideal vantage point from which to examine” affective and cognitive processes associated with shared meaning (“Interaction” 103). However, as Hoffman notes, and my project intends to make clear, empathetic responses are too often examined as either affective displays intrinsic to human experience and thereby beyond analysis, or when empathy is viewed through the lens of poststructuralist discourse, as cognitive misperception that cannot accomplish its task of helping speaker’s “feel what another person feels” (103).

In her essay “Class Affects, Classroom Affectations,” Julie Lindquist engages the problems associated with the affective/cognitive divide and suggests that scholars often ignore the affective dimension of writers’ experiences as a result of the “social turn” in rhetoric and composition studies. Instead of interrogating the “complex affective experience” of issues like class, gender, and race, scholars tend to view student resistance as determined by sets of “social issues” identifiable “through systematic analysis” (190). Lindquist, in order to address the “naïveté” of critical pedagogies that ignore the implications of affect, proposes that teachers of rhetoric and composition allow students to express their affective experiences, a process made possible by a teacher’s ability to employ *strategic empathy*. Lindquist, using the language of theater and performance, suggests that strategic empathy involves teachers “deep acting,” the ability to turn their selves over to the possibility that they may in fact respond empathetically to the student’s affective performance, even though they are cognizant of their desire to “seem

empathetic.” Through this deep acting that leads to seemingly authentic displays of empathy, teachers create an environment in which students are able to interrogate the complex structures that shape their identity by playing their affective responses off the teacher’s affective responses to them. The engaged empathetic listener, through her affective performance in response to the student, is able to highlight the tensions and complexities present in the student’s thinking and thereby challenge him to develop cognitive awareness alongside his affective responses.

Much could be said about Lindquist’s “hidden script,” and the implications of “acting” on critical pedagogy’s goals of interrogating ideology, especially given that many oppressive ideologies continue to function as a result of their disingenuous engagement with people. However, this project is more interested with Lindquist’s vacillation between empathy as affective experience and cognitive analytic. Students, Lindquist contends, are often limited by their “historical cultures,” which we might understand as “home languages,” or “discourse community,” or any other moniker that signifies a set of conventions developed away from and prior to entrance into the academy. A student’s historical community varies greatly from the “political cultures” of the university, those cultures that promote critical practices intended to illuminate the tensions between institutions and individuals. Students, Lindquist argues, respond emotionally to the criticisms of “political cultures” that teachers often level at the discourse communities with which they identify. Therefore, a “political culture’s” critique of meritocracy may be met with anger and frustration from a working-class student that views the academy as a means of upward mobility. A student’s affective

response to ideas that challenge her prior commitments represent crucial first steps to developing rhetorical awareness; however, these initial responses, while in need of careful consideration, are nevertheless initial, and therefore teachers should use *strategic empathy* as a means of allowing these initial responses to do the work of critical inquiry *so that* students can *develop* more mature rhetorical practices. In other words, Lindquist, ironically, in her contention that writers move from affective responses to the cognitive ability to engage multiple discourse communities, is demonstrating the social constructionist contention that she criticizes. While affectations may be embodied, that is to say “real” in the biological and neurological sense, ultimately these expressions can be traced to particular conventions of prior conceptual schemes through a writer’s articulation. For Lindquist, affect and cognition are discrete elements of rhetorical performance that can be analyzed separately like any other element of the composition process.

Theresa Kulbaga, however, suggests that the degree to which we empathize with the other, while our affective engagement may motivate us, is limited to our capacity to understand the “cultures” that shape the other’s responses to the world. Kulbaga criticizes the consumptive behavior of the West as it pertains to texts like *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which (re)present the “Other” in terms of Western ideologies. The “Oprah Book Club Culture,” Kulbaga quips, too often views texts involving the ethnic other as moments for “transnational empathy,” or, the belief that consuming the other’s stories will lead to empathetic development, a pedagogical assumption, Kulbaga argues, which shapes the approach readers take toward texts dealing with cultural and ethnic differences.

So, while Kulbaga and Lindquist both agree with Lynn Worsham and understand affective responses as socially and historically constructed and performed through embodiment, Kulbaga highlights the limitations of embodied responses. Like Jacobs and Micciche, Kulbaga sees appeals to empathy as “evidence of one’s position in social relations,” which is to say, empathy is socially constructed through a person’s membership in particular cultural institutions (*A Way to Move* 4).

Kulbaga and Lindquist, like the other writer’s mentioned above, continue wrestling with the classical problem of *pathos*. As feminist scholars like Catherine A. Lutz point out, emotions have traditionally been discussed in terms of “female” attributes, “something natural rather than cultural, irrational rather than rational,” and “physical rather than mental or intellectual” (“Engendered Emotions” 69). Therefore, in order to recover the role emotions, like empathy, play in the construction of rhetorical appeals, scholars, particularly feminist and postcolonial scholars, argue that emotions be viewed as “connected to our rational and ethical lives” (Jacob and Micciche 5). The problem, however, in arguing that affective responses are as essential and as rational as other deliberative rhetorical acts is that it simply applies the same social constructionist analysis to emotions. That is, in accepting the notion that the affective dimension is embodied but only made visible to others through discourse, scholars have simply multiplied the interpretive problem that influences contemporary rhetorical theory, namely, that any conceptual scheme is susceptible to critique on the grounds of idiosyncrasy and speculation. Simply put, if our interpretations of the other are relative to communities, cultures, and languages, then claims of “shared meaning” remain

susceptible to critiques of solipsism and ethnocentrism, a critique particularly damaging to notions of *identification*.

Burke's sense of rhetoric's identifying capacity, the belief that interlocutors can both share meaning and remain distinct, is continually challenged by Burke's own view that language functions as a medium. Richard Coe summarizes Burke's position clearly when he writes, "For Burke, everything essentially human derives from our being symbol-making animals.... Our very perceptions – as well as our interpretations, attitudes, judgments, choices, and the actions that follow – are all mediated by the symbols we make, use, abuse and are, in this sense used by" (40). Coe concludes, "As historical and social groups, we *make* language" and, therefore, "Everything we do is mediated by our symbols" (41). As Coe's comments make clear, Burke's notion of identification is similar to Agosta's claim about empathy – identification functions in a hermeneutic circle. Diane Davis notices this feature in Burke's writing as well when she writes, "Burke describes identity as an effect of the processes of identification *and* identification as the achievement of an already discernable (biological) 'identity'" (128). In the same fashion as empathy, identifications between people are both the product of and the evidence for shared meaning. Therefore, "from the moment he [Burke] determines that identification is a function of (rather than the condition for) shared meaning—as soon as he situates identification *within* the arena of representation, in other words—he has already presumed a prior divisiveness and engaged the necessary contradiction" (129).³ The contradiction Diane Davis points to is Burke's notion of *substance*, one of the focuses of his essay *A Grammar of Motives*.

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke argues that human experience takes place within the paradoxical space of *substance*. Substance, for Burke, is the *a priori* condition within which all humans find themselves – a world of symbolic interactions. As Burke suggests, people are “separated from [their] natural conditions by instruments of [their] own making” (qtd.in Richter 633). Rather than referring to human beings as *homo sapiens*, Burke argues that *homo symbolicus* more accurately describes human existence. Human beings exist in a state of constant symbolical interaction. This constant state of symbolic interaction makes up the substance into which the drama of life unfolds. Moreover, these interactions within substance provide us with the only available means of accessing the other’s thoughts, and without knowing the other’s thoughts sharing meaning with others about the world is impossible, an impossibility that challenges our survival. “Indeed,” Burke writes of the internal/external dualism that defines human experience, “we can take it as a reliable rule of thumb that, whenever we find a distinction between the internal and the external, the intrinsic and the extrinsic, the within and the without...we can expect to encounter the paradoxes of substance” (1008). As David Richter points out, people are “so conditioned by language and the social aspects of life that are created within and through language that even his physiology has changed from that of the arboreal apes from which he descended” (633). So central to human experience is identification that Burke suggests it should replace persuasion, traditionally the key term of rhetorical study, because we can persuade a person “only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (55). In other words, identifications occur as interlocutors translate the symbolic

actions of another into familiar symbolic patterns, and this process of translation, which Burke calls identification, makes the paradoxes of substance clear: we can identify with the other and share meaning, but in doing so we are made aware of our distinctiveness, of what we typically don't share.

Shared meanings—the result of rhetorical identifications—exist only insofar as we are able to decode the symbolic acts of others and enter into their cognitive space. Thus, while Burke argues for a constitutive understanding of symbolic interaction, he nonetheless implies that the central function of identification, to make persuasion possible, necessarily means that on occasion persuasion is not possible, which means speakers may not arrive at shared identifications in all circumstances. In other words, the metaphysical divisions that define us remain, and while we continue to interact in a shared substance, we do not necessarily share in identifications. That is, we are unable to create identifications when the metaphysical distance between the other and ourselves is too great—when the space between our languages, or cultures, or histories, is greater than our bridge building capacity.

Herein lies what I term Burke's *contradictory potentiality*: Burke is neither a social constructionist nor a proto-interactionist; therefore, his work serves as both friend and foil to my current project. This contradictory potentiality rears itself when Burke writes, "In pure identification there would be no strife. Likewise, there would be no strife in absolute separateness, since opponents can join battle only through mediatory ground that makes their communication possible, thus providing the first condition necessary for their interchange of blows" (*Rhetoric* 25). Here Burke identifies why *substance* remains

crucial to any theory of discourse: even though theorists have long sought to banish the term, “far from banishing its *functions* one merely conceals them” (“Grammar”1006). Therefore, life is a constant struggle between symbolic interactions because we are never absolutely the same as the other, nor are we ever so different that we avoid strife because it is impossible to share any similar conceptions of the same world. Thus, as we will see, Burke’s thinking is not that far afield from the work of Donald Davidson or George Mead, the thinkers most influential to what Stephen R. Yarbrough names discursive interaction. However, it is the one difference that makes all the difference: Burke continues to believe in the existence of language – a metaphysical reality that exerts force on the world of objects. For Burke, symbols *are real*: they exist *prior* to human use of them. In this way Burke’s theory of identification remains open to poststructuralist critiques that question the capacity of language (or any symbolic system) to create shared meanings. This, then, is identification’s *contradictory* orientation toward an interactionist notion of empathy, which views the sharing of language irrelevant to the sharing of meaning. However, I intend to demonstrate the *potentiality* of Burke’s thinking to an interactionist definition of intersubjective meaning. First, though, it must be made clear how poststructuralist critiques of identification are simply tautological, or as Kenneth Gergen suggests, once a critique begins with assumption that there are “texts,” we have entered into “the self-created prison” of contemporary theory. There, Rifkin’s proposal remains hopelessly unattainable, and rhetoric’s best means of entering into Rifkin’s discussion, identification, appears fatally flawed.

The “Post” Problem: Poststructuralism and the Question(able) (Notion) of Shared Meaning

As Richard Coe points out, rhetoricians are apt to honor Kenneth Burke “more than we use him” (39). In part, this lack of use stems from the difficulty of Burke’s prose. I find Burke’s theory confusing because on many occasions Burke sounds very much like the poststructuralist, post-process rhetoricians who, at least since “the social turn” in rhetoric and composition studies, have, to a large extent, influenced the field. For these theorists, discourse is derivative of and evidence for particular communities, cultures and histories, which are unstable, contingent, and subject to change given historical, discursive conditions. Or, as Sidney Dobrin writes, “post-process composition studies” focus on “issues of social construction rather than on issues of the individual writer working within an individual process (“Paralogic” 132).⁴ By emphasizing “larger influential structures,” like language, culture, community, history, and the like, rhetoric and composition turned away from the expressivist impulse to imagine discourse as the evidence of a fully-constituted agent’s internal dialogue. As Daniel Smith argues, “many of us in rhetoric and composition have relinquished the idea of a self-constituting, sovereign subject in favor of conceiving of the subject as ‘socially constructed’” (887). Given Dobrin’s and Smith’s comments it is easy to read Burke’s work as influencing this social constructionist paradigm, especially when he writes, “Man, *qua* man, is a symbol user. In this respect, every aspect of his ‘reality’ is likely to be seen through a fog of symbols” (136). For Burke, all experiences, beliefs, attitudes, values, and decisions are the result of “larger influential structures.” As the symbol-using animal, human beings

are bound to the world and each other through the mediation of symbols; this is the essential characteristic of human existence. Burke's position is echoed in James Berlin's definition of Social-Epistemic Rhetoric, which he describes in the following way: "Only through language do we know and act upon the conditions of our experience. Ways of living and dying are finally negotiated through discourse, the cultural codes that are part of our historical conditions"; therefore, "the subject that experiences and the material and social conditions experienced are discursively constituted in historically specific terms" (82). Berlin's remarks, along with the work of Kenneth Bruffee, Karen Burke LeFevre, Stanley Fish, and Thomas Kuhn, help define social constructionist thinking, and align well with Burke's understanding of how all human experience is mediated through language, culture, or history – the *a priori* socially determined symbolic systems that human beings employ to make sense of the world.

Richard Coe adequately summarizes the implications of Burke's social constructionist position when he writes, "our interpretations, attitudes, judgments, choices and the actions that follow" are "all mediated by the symbols we make, use, abuse, and are, in this sense, used by." Human beings are thus "removed from nature into culture" (43). "Culture," a substance in which the constant interaction of symbols occurs, "negates nature" and creates the "nature/culture boundary," and thereby the human condition "becomes more social than natural" (43) or, as genre theorists Janet Giltrow and Michele Valiquette suggest, the supposed "shared-knowledge-of-the-world" that culture provides to its members is "boundary-forming" (49). The cultures that are formed because of symbol-use are assumed, as Kenneth Gergen writes, to give shape to the

exterior (the physical world), but culture also creates the totality through which the physical world is imbued with meaning. Simply put, our understanding of the world is relative to the linguistically determined communities to which we belong. And, since, as Richard Coe contends, “we are...beings who continually define and redefine ourselves through the symbolic processes of language, discourse, rhetoric, culture” (48), it seems reasonable, therefore, to agree with Thomas Kent that for Burke, Coe, and the countless others that identify as social constructivists “our interpretations do not correspond to a world outside of our communities, nor do our interpretations represent anything except the reality we communally construct or ‘invent’” (“Ethnocentrism” 91). Thus, whether understood as Rifkin’s project of global empathy or Burke’s hope for identification, both terms run up against the same troubling reality—the meaning of rhetorical appeals made to shared meaning are *always already* imaginary. That is, if Burke, and the social constructionist thought he inspires, is correct, all we can know about the world, and thereby the other, is what we already know, the result of our acculturation into particular discourse communities.

This is precisely the problem Elaine Scarry points out when she writes, “The way we act toward ‘others’ is shaped by the way we imagine others,” and at the most basic level we fail in imagining others “in their full weight and solidity” because interpretation is limited to the subjective interiority of each person (40). Learning to imagine the other, which is to say, share meaning about the world, is, as Rifkin passionately argues, a necessary step in saving the planet from destruction: “Only by concerted action that establishes a collective sense of affiliation with the entire biosphere will we have a

chance to ensure our future” (616). Rifkin’s remarks are similar in scope to Gary Olson when he writes in “Encountering the Other” that poststructuralism and postcolonialism illuminate the inherently ethical questions at the heart of discourse in a new global age. Stated succinctly, our discourse practices influence our ethical practices (or, as Burke might say, our symbolic interactions create the cultures to which we attribute our ethical value systems), and these practices develop intersubjectively with others through communication. Thus, “*Ethics is the encounter with the Other*” (85). To encounter the Other, however, remains a problematic proposition because of the inherent Cartesian dualism at work in social constructionist thinking. As Scarry’s remarks demonstrate, to engage the other ethically demands both that meaning be shared *and* the other remain distinct (“full weight and solidity”). However, to empathize (identify) with the other implies, as Burke does, the human capacity to bridge the metaphysical gaps that exist between people, an implication that, as Donald Davidson demonstrates, is dubiously paradoxical.

If we continue to hold the belief that we “see the world through language,” we are unable to describe how people, regardless of their assumed cultural similarities, could share meaning (Davidson *Truth* 127). This problem is made quite clear in contemporary rhetorical theory dealing with issues of cross-cultural communication. For example, Krista Ratcliffe (tangentially working with Burke’s notion of identification) argues that *rhetorical listening* “may precede *conscious* identifications” (19). If I understand Ratcliffe correctly, conscious identifications are the product of rhetorical inventions that result from interpretive listening. That is, when confronted with “cross-cultural” expanses

that seem too great to cross, interlocutors may use rhetorical listening as a means to locate metaphysical crossings that are more manageable. As Ratcliffe states, “they [conscious identifications] provide ground for revising identifications troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance” (19). Discovering the grounds for identification, given that “words” for Ratcliffe function “not as transparent descriptors of thought that stipulate only dictionary definitions but rather as tropes (i.e., rhetorical figures) that suggest multiple meanings,” seems like an impossible task (9). However, if Ratcliffe believes what she is saying about meanings always being multiple, how do speakers and listeners know when they have arrived at feasible identifications?

Ratcliffe further muddies her project when, in an attempt to avoid offering a totalizing theory that essentializes the other, writes, “*Listening metonymically* signifies the rhetorical-listening moves that listeners make in public discussions when identifying a text or person with a cultural group; specifically, this tactic invites listeners to assume that a text or a person is associated with – but not necessarily representative of – an entire cultural group” (77). Here, Ratcliffe seems to step away from her original argument that an interlocutor’s ability to listen rhetorically provides the means by which she may determine the cultural-linguistic institutions that influence the other’s discourse, recognition that leads to the construction of rhetorical identifications. Instead, Ratcliffe warns that an interlocutor’s discursive practices are never entirely the consequence of a particular community’s influence. There is no determining, at least not through Ratcliffe’s theory, when an interlocutor’s discourse is the product of a particular community or the product of her own idiosyncratic behavior. In other words, language

leads to culture, and interpretation of language derives from culture. Therefore, rhetoricians are to assume that both are at play in the constructions of an interlocutor's rhetorical acts. And, while I agree with Ratcliffe that our utterances are formed holistically, I am uncertain as to how she expects interlocutors to identify with each other when her theory offers no way for interlocutor's to claim they know with certainty the other's orientation to particular discursive exigencies. Ratcliffe, like many contemporary theorists, is more concerned with questions of agency—knowing from where the individual's discourse derives—rather than the actual sharing of meaning. That is, her theory of rhetorical listening offers no way claim that we actually “hear” each other; instead rhetorical listening reminds us that there are a multiplicity of structures that define an our communicative acts, and thereby a multiplicity of structures that will interfere with out interlocutors' ability to share meaning with us.

Susan Jarrett, like Ratcliffe, uses the term “metonymic” when she discusses the usefulness of postcolonial theory for rhetoric and composition studies in helping writers locate the multiple identities that intersect to determine agency. Using the language of Deborah Sommer, Jarrett describes metonymy as “a lateral move of identification-through-relationship, which acknowledges the possible differences among ‘us’ as components of centerless whole” (qtd. in Jarratt 113). Identification in Jarratt's formation is much like Diane Davis's description of how Burke views identity. That is, *identities* are internalized collections of the mutable, contingent, and unstable identifications that form from the individual's constant interaction with other symbol-users, or as Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, “individuality presupposes sociability” (20). Thus, Jarrett, and I

think Ratcliffe, although she is less clear, assume that an ethical approach to the other involves the realization that there are no “essential identifications” – identifications exist in relationship to other people and texts, which is to say they are subject to oppression, violence and discrimination from those in power who cannot or will not locate shared meanings.

Jarratt hopes that interlocutors will discourse with each other ethically because they come to realize that a person’s existence, which is recognized by the linguistic constructions he or she creates in response to the exigencies of particular relationships, is expansive and occasionally contradictory – “we write multiple versions” of ourselves (128). Both Jarratt and Ratcliffe find the answer to the ethical dilemma Olson proposes by emphasizing the dynamic multiplicity of identifications that intersect to form identities. We might say that for Jarratt, Olson, Ratcliffe, and others, a rhetoric of identity is similar to Paul de Man’s “anti-definition of rhetoric”: identification is the name for “that which is the limit – that which escapes, that which is the residue of efforts at ‘catching’ things with systems” (298). Identifications, shared meanings of any kind, are the residue of larger institutions that shape discourse, but these institutions exist prior to and regardless of human intervention. Therefore, as Jay Jordan writes, “identity is always already an active, social process” because identification as the “basic ‘function of sociality’” underlies both positive and negative associations; moreover, these associations cannot be avoided (“Dell Hymes” 266). Jordan’s comments point the direction for most contemporary theory dealing with questions of difference: identifications with cultures, languages, and others is unavoidable, but to propose totalizing theories that explain these

interactions is impossible. Thus the goal of rhetoric should be to provide interlocutors with methods capable of producing ethical identifications across difference.

Some, like Patricia Bizzell, have engaged the contemporary rhetorical problems of communication across difference by arguing that interlocutors must be familiar with numerous “cultural literacies” in order to communicate effectively. In her essay “Beyond Anti-Foundationalism to Rhetorical Authority,” Bizzell criticizes the ethnocentrism and simplicity of E.D. Hirsch’s claim that Americans lack a shared cultural literacy. As Bizzell points out, for Hirsch, sharing a common discourse “means not only sharing a tongue but also sharing a mass contextual knowledge that renders a tongue significant” (662). In other words, Bizzell argues that to have language implies having culture, and, therefore, “every form of literacy is a particular cultural literacy” (662). Implicit to Hirsch’s argument, Bizzell continues, is the notion that “stable entities” like discourse communities exist. Bizzell remains suspicious of this notion, stating, “I now think the academic discourse community is more unstable than this – more fraught with contradiction, more polyvocal – and that this instability is a sign of its health, its ability to adapt to changing historical conditions” (662-663). Bizzell, then, might agree with Phyllis Mentall Ryder when she writes, “To teach ‘public literacy’ for a multicultural society is to teach the logic and argument of multiple rhetorics” (508). Thus, Bizzell and Ryder, like other critical pedagogues who feel the role of writing is to expose and respond to ideologies that shape our identities, believe, like Burke, that language serves as the means by which communities, identifications, and identities are formed. Also like

Burke, Bizzell sees these communities, identifications, and identities as dynamic, contingent, and subject to change in response to historical and discursive conditions.

Bizzell's emphasis on contingency serves as a caution to rhetoricians too willing to imagine discourse and community as stable entities, an idea numerous rhetoricians exploring the discursive problems associated with what Linda Flowers calls "communication across difference" have examined. Whether it be the work of thinkers like Victor Villaneuva, Keith Gilyard, and Min-Zhan Lu, who examine the centrality of ethnicity to rhetorics of identity; ecocompositionists like Sidney Dobrin, Christian Weisser, and Julie Drew who attempt to explore the role place plays in the construction of identity and identifications; or, genre theorists like Anis Bawarshi, Amy Devitt, and Mary Joe Reiff, who explore the vitality of genre to explain the capacity to create shared meaning through mutable, contingent linguistic conventions, all of these views work to describe how it is that discourse helps create shared meaning without falling into the trap of essentializing either discourse communities or the people that comprise these unstable, dynamic social collectives.

Theresa Kulbaga's essay "Pleasurable Pedagogies" provides a clear example of a thinker trying to navigate the problems of social construction and the poststructuralist insistence on instability. In her essay Kulbaga challenges *Reading Lolita in Tehran* author Azar Nafisi's claim that reading about the lives of the other leads to "transnational empathy." Kulbaga, looking to explore "the emergence of empathy as a key transnational discourse," suggests that rhetorics of empathy often elide their connection to consumption. Too often, readers, particularly Western readers, "consume" literature and

thereby “the other’s story of pain and pleasure” –literally, the other is subsumed within the imagination of the reader (507-508). Kulbaga sharply criticizes what she calls members of the “American Oprah Culture” who, like those who participate in Oprah’s book club, view reading about the other “as an act of pure imagination, a magical means of self-discovery as well as empathetic connection,” confirming the message of Oprah’s book club that literature should be self-empowering and life-affirming (508). Kulbaga is clear in her position: empathy *is a type of discourse*, and therefore like any discourse is local, volatile, and subject to historical conditions. Therefore, claiming “to empathize with the other,” especially the transnational other, is a project rife with problems and often leads to the type of essentializing postcolonial theorists like Bhabha, Said, and Spivak warn against. That warning is against as Deepika Bahri describes, forgetting that postcolonialism, whether applied to literary theory, rhetoric, writing pedagogy, or Oprah’s book club, is still the exploration of the effects of interactions between colonizing powers and colonized peoples, and the cultural, linguistic, historical, and social scars that from those interactions (74-75). In other words, as Patricia Roberts-Miller argues, appealing to rhetorics of empathy obscures the oppressive force of those with discursive power, which often leads to a version of identification with the other that is voyeuristic and self-centered.⁵

In “The Tragic Limits of Compassionate Politics,” Roberts-Miller demonstrates how empathy, like identification, intends “to collapse the space between people”; however, “the degree to which we feel compassion and outrage depends, in large degree, on how much *we identify*” with the other (692, 693, emphasis added). Thus, and this is

perhaps the most damning critique of identification, our ability to empathize with the other and create identifications, exists to the extent that we care about ourselves, a “kind of self-love,” which is to say, “one loves the other person because (and to the extent that) one could be that person” (692). For Roberts-Miller, the reductive tendency of rhetorical identification and empathy impedes any real capacity for altruism, let alone shared meaning. Roberts-Miller’s comments sound similar to the concerns raised by postcolonial thinker and activist Gayatri Spivak when she writes, “The anti-essentialist cannot conceive of an identity (even in the case of Luce Irigaray when the female body is evoked as foundational) somehow existing outside the constraints of a particular culture in a specific time and place: ‘The self is always production rather than ground’” (212). Identifications, even those that supposedly begin with empathy, will remain unstable, at times incoherent, and likely to fail if the cultures from which interlocutors derive their discourse are too disparate. Simply put, there is no way to know that we know anything *with* the other. At best, shared meaning is speculative. At worst, impossible.

It is this dire cynicism—believing there is no way to share meaning with the other in any objective fashion given the representational limits of language and culture—that has led thinkers like Richard Miller to abandon the notion that the study of rhetoric and writing can help interlocutors develop agency and identifications. Instead, Miller suggests that we would be better off simply working through our personal “institutional biographies” and developing narratives, albeit misinformed and incomplete narratives due to the limits of discourse, that explain how we have been thoroughly constructed by the institutions that determine our existence. Michael Bernard-Donals, even more adverse

to Burke's identification project, suggests that rhetoricians would do well to dispense with notions of "the public or of common ground," which is to say identification altogether, and instead see argument as "*beginning with the instability of the human subject*" (31). Bernard-Donals, like Miller, seeks to begin his exploration with "the marginalization of subject positions" (31). So, while Burke's theory of identification acknowledges the divisions between people, he also assumes that identifications necessarily develop within the substance of discourse, an essential characteristic of the symbol-using animal. Bernard-Donals, however, believes that discourses that avoid appeals to the public or the common "acknowledges that between ourselves and the neighbor there is a space that, as often as not, can't be traversed" (48).

In many ways this literature review is intended to demonstrate the disciplines simultaneous and contradictory claims with regards to communication across difference. The predominant, disciplinary view of discourse, in the field rhetoric and composition studies, is clearly articulated by Kenneth Gergen: "*the terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people*" (49 emphasis in the original). This view leads to the problems of identification described above. While we want to suggest that discourse provides the means of creating meaningful identifications between people, it seems impossible to claim that such shared meaning is possible, at least in any objective fashion. Of course, if Rifkin is correct and empathy is central to solving the problems of the twenty-first century then rhetoric and composition has little to offer to his project because our contemporary theoretical models fail to move beyond

the internal/external problem that has haunted the Western tradition since Plato suggested that all discourse is representational. Or, as Thomas Kent phrases the problem, if “human subjectivity embodies all that we can know about the world,” then “we obviously cannot explain how is it that we know anything at all about the world outside of our own subjectivity,” and “in addition we cannot explain how it is that we know the mind of the other [the phrase Kent uses to describe what I have been referring to as shared meaning or identification] since we only possess contact with our private minds or our internalized conceptual schemes” (“Externalism” 61). In the end, there is no way to create identifications that do not beg the question. That is, identifications remain purely speculative if we continue to discourse with the assumption that things like language and culture are real.

Meaningful Provocation - Beyond Substance Toward Discourse Studies

My study is determined to demonstrate the following. First, rhetoric and composition needs to develop a methodology for engaging the project of global empathy. Second, to achieve this goal requires an interactionist approach to rhetoric and composition studies. However, before we can explore or explicate either of these goals we must take a crucial and provocative first step: the dismissal of language and culture as the substance in which our discourse occurs. Or, perhaps, to say this in an even less politically correct fashion, the study of rhetoric and composition, if it is to aid in Rifkin’s proposed project, needs to begin with the seemingly counterintuitive step of claiming that

language and culture are not real, at least not in the ways our discipline continues to assume.

Stuart Hall's comments are extremely helpful in describing the debilitating affect of contemporary theory. In an interview with *JAC*, Stuart Hall painted the following picture of contemporary thought:

We are trapped by the deconstructive moment in some of the primary concepts with which cultural studies is trying to operate. These are its concepts. Each of them is no longer tenable in terms of an old vocabulary, but we have no entirely new dispensation with which to think. It requires a kind of double operation, rhetorically, discursively, in that one uses terms that are untenable; one occupies a conceptual world but one no longer believes in the translation.
(Drew, "Cultural Composition")

His statement, in many ways, summarizes the findings of my analysis from the previous section. Rhetoric and composition studies continues, as John Schilb suggested at the 2010 MLA conference, to focus on questions of agency, and the concept of agency seems to vacillate, quite readily, between the "autonomous writer of foundationalism" and the notion that subjectivity is simply a "deliberating pun, and agency an illusion" (Jones "Beyond" 81).

This conceptual back and forth, however, is understandable given the assumed polarities between which rhetoric functions – the distance between the "subject/object, internal/external Cartesian split that so dominates the Western epistemological tradition" (Bawarshi, "Beyond Dichotomy" 69). Since Plato had Socrates discuss his cave, the Western intellectual tradition developed under the assumption that internal mental states rendered experiences in the physical world meaningful. The supposed separation between

the mind and the world necessarily created problems of representation – the only way to know the world is to know a particular kind of language to describe the world. Truth, therefore, became the product of language. The more accurately a word, or sentence, or figure, could represent the “reality” of the world, the more truthful. Of course, this foundationalist position, supported by a structuralist notion of language that suggested meaning derives from the systematic relationship of signs, lacked the capacity to withstand post-structuralist critiques, which demonstrated that language could not fulfill its representational function because the meaning of a word or figure is always deferred. This deferral, of course, is the natural outcome of system of signs that depends upon the relationships between signs in order to make meaning – meaning is deferred because systematic relationships are infinite. Thereby, meaning and “truth” are speculative characteristics of discourse because relationships between signs are never stable.

In order to soften the blow of poststructuralist thinking, particularly the deconstruction of Derrida, social constructionists argued that the instability of language, while prevalent, is not totalizing. There are still ways to locate meaning, but to do so requires the hermeneutic work of determining the social conditions, and the practices and conventions stemming from those conditions, that shape a person’s or community’s discourse. Kenneth Bruffee famously uses “conversation” as the metaphor for describing a socially-constructed discourse: “any effort to understand how we think requires us to understand the nature of conversation; and any effort to understand conversation requires us to understand the nature of community life that generates and maintains conversation” (421). Implicit in Bruffee’s comment is the notion that discourse is the product of a

particular community life or culture, and interlocutors can decode the discourse practices of the other if they understand the culture that shapes the other's utterances.

Since Bruffe made these remarks, however, many have questioned his assumption that translation is possible. As Ratcliffe and Jarratt demonstrate above, "decoding" the linguistic and cultural practices of the other *is a hermeneutical process*, and like all interpretive processes it stems from a particular view of the world. In other words, what I know about you stems from my view of the world as rendered through the linguistic and cultural "lenses" that shape my thinking. There are no innocent interpretations—all meaning is the product of a particular community's discourse. Thus, we have returned to Burke's original claim, identifications imply division and these divisions are not only biological (I am not physically the other), but also cultural (I do not participate in the socially determined activities as the other). However, theories like Burke's concept of identification, which assumes that human beings must accept the ambiguity of division and consubstantiality, offer little more than new terms for Cartesian dualistic thinking.

There seems no reason to continue exploring the possibility of identification, empathy, shared meaning, or intersubjectivity, if these ambiguities remain unchallenged. All that can be said about sharing meaning has been written, or, as John Schilb quips, too much of our disciplinary writing begins with a "drive-by Foucault quotation" intended to direct us toward the same critiques of agency, ideology, and culture that started when Derrida first mentioned the word "deconstruction." In other words, our theoretical approaches to discourse can no longer answer the pragmatic question, "what difference does it make" to continue pointing out the limitations of language and culture to provide

a description of shared meaning, especially given that, for the most part, most tend to believe this?

As a pragmatist, however, I believe these rhetorical problems are still relevant, especially given the unique situations in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century. More than ever, discursive interactions occur between *others*. As technology further shrinks our world, these interactions will become more frequent and more important. Is it possible, in order to share a world with finite resources and a limited geography, to discourse with the other respectfully, compassionately, and with civility? Is it possible to create identifications with the other that neither appeal to the foundationalism of Western ethnocentrism nor the nihilism of post-structuralist thinking? Is it possible to articulate a version of rhetorical empathy that allows the other to maintain his or her “full weight”—the full weight of his or her traditions and practices, which are viewed as central for informing one’s action in the world? I believe we can answer all these questions in the affirmative, but to do so requires a view of identification that locates meaning not as a conceptual object of a person’s interiority, a product of an idiosyncratic usage of language and culture. Instead, I propose that rhetoric and composition explore the implications of Donald Davidson’s proposal that there is no such thing as language, at least not the current view of language, which describes language as a representational medium that exists *prior* to discourse, mediates experience, and continues to function regardless of human intervention. Meaning, from this view, is always idiosyncratic, the product of one’s unique interaction with language. I argue that rhetoric and composition would be better served by accepting an interactionist account of

discourse, which views the determination of meaning an inherently intersubjective process.

A useful understanding of interactionism, however, requires a brief discussion of two of its key concepts. First, interactionism derives, in part, from Donald Davidson's *causal/external* understanding of shared meaning. Second, if shared meaning is possible, it will require a dismissal of the notion of *substance*, which, in our current historical moment, is most commonly understood as "culture."

The first step is to understand what Donald Davidson means by his "fully external" approach to meaning. In order to avoid the perpetual paradoxes of internal/external, nature/culture, and language/experience dichotomies that define the Western intellectual tradition, and thereby the rhetorical tradition, we require an explanation of meaning that gets "outside" subjectivity. Davidson refers to this position as *externalist* thinking. Thomas Kent describes Davidson's project as "Moving beyond the inherent Cartesianism present in cognitivist and social constructionist theory"; instead, "Davidson invites us to imagine writing as a hermeneutical interaction among language users, a conception of writing that does not require us to posit a split between a knowing subject and an imperturbable world of objects and events" ("Language Philosophy" 2-3). In suggesting that meaning occurs outside the interiority of subjectivity, Davidson eliminates problems of incommensurability, which are inherent in dualistic thinking because the assumption is that to share meaning means to enter into the other's cognitive space. Davidson's externalism requires no such journey into the mind of the other.

In believing that these divisions exist, interlocutors must assume that experience is therefore mediated *through* some kind conceptual scheme. Conceptual schemes, whether understood as language or culture, function as the medium through which people “see” the world. As social constructionist point out, however, each agent interprets and thereby uses these schemes in unique ways. Hence Davidson’s remark, “Conceptual relativism,” the belief that all people speak their own language, possess their own culture, or scheme for interpreting the world, “is a heady and exotic doctrine, or would be if we could make sense of it” (*Essential* 196). The problem with this doctrine, which is to say the problem with social construction in general, is that, “Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability” (197). Conceptual schemes, like language, further complicate the claim that speakers can share meaning because the guiding poststructuralist assumption “is the idea that *any* language distorts reality, which implies that it is only wordlessly if at all that the mind come to grips with things as they really are” (197). The only way to understand the other, then, is to translate his scheme into a recognizable idiom, and by doing so we have no longer maintained our ethical obligation to maintain the other’s “full weight.”

Therefore, in order to save the notion of shared meaning, yet allow the other to be the *other*, Davidson seeks a description of communicative interaction that seeks to provide “an alternative account that doesn’t depend upon people doing the same thing” (Kent, “Language Philosophy” 11). In order to provide account of how interlocutors can communicate without sharing the same things, Davidson offers the notion of

triangulation. I will explore this concept in great detail in chapter three, but for now, it is important to note that triangulation provides the genesis for my understanding and application of what Stephen R. Yarbrough calls *discourse studies*. Triangulation suggests that communication does not depend on shared language, culture, history, or any other conceptual scheme. This point cannot be emphasized enough. Nearly all rhetorical problems, that is, problems of locating the available means of persuasion in a given context, are supposedly problems, as Davidson would say, of translation: Interlocutors are unable to share meaning with the other because they cannot translate the conceptual schemes influencing the other's discourse, cannot access the linguistic or cultural repertoire that make utterances meaningful for the other. Instead of trying to explain how translation is possible, triangulation focuses on how the *sharing of objects of common concern* provides a definition of communication between genuine others.

Triangulation, or rather, how triangulation is understood, helps to divide up the disparate strands of externalist thinking that derive from Davidson's work. In the simplest terms, triangulation is the interactive process through which two (at least) interlocutors direct their partner's attention toward an object of common concern, and, through their interaction of marks, noises, or gestures, begin to respond to the object in a similar fashion. For Kent, the central importance of triangulation lies in interlocutors using *paralogic hermeneutics* to arrive at shared meaning. Kent summarizes his version of externalism in the following way, "Because we can never match precisely our hermeneutic strategy with another's strategy...we ceaselessly shift ground in our guesses about how others may be interpreting our language code" ("Paralogic" 35). Kent makes

clear that making ourselves clear is the purpose of triangulation. That is, Kent takes as a given that the object of triangulation, to some extent, functions similarly for both speakers; therefore the “most fundamental activity of discourse production is the hermeneutic act,” or, how interlocutors continually adjust their responses to each other so that they arrive at a common “language code” for a given object.

At this point, then, I want to mark the distinction between Kent’s externalism (also see: Bawarshi, Reed Way Dasenbrock, Matthew Heard, and Kevin J. Porter) and Stephen R. Yarbrough’s conception of *discursive interactionism*, the pragmatically influenced view of externalism to which I subscribe and to which this project hopes to contribute and further. For Yarbrough, Kent’s version of externalism misses the mark because Kent assumes that the primary function of triangulation is learning to decode the other’s marks, noises, and gestures. However, as Yarbrough makes clear, Davidson’s fundamental concern lies in the inventive process of determining the relationships between interlocutors and objects that influence their marks, noises, and gestures toward each other. Yarbrough explains this idea in the following way, “Invention, conceived as the attempt to reproduce the conditions that will affect our hearer’s or reader’s object (the problem to be solved) *is* fundamental” (*After* 223). This notion, that interlocutors share meaning because their discourse mutually conditions the relationships of triangulation represents the key interactionist principle of discourse: finding out what an object means, what an object *is*, and what do with the object are exactly the same process (“Passing” 85).

This conception of discourse leads to the next important idea on the way to understanding what is meant by the phrase *discourse studies*. Meaning, in an interactionist account of triangulation, is necessarily shared, and as we will see later, meaning is also environmentally and temporally bound, mutable, contingent, and objective. Moreover, since meaning is created via an inferential process that mimics how we get around in the world – we respond, adjust, change, and react based on temporally bound conditions of our environment – we can agree with Davidson that once we give up the notion of language or culture, we realize that communication is no different than anything else we do in the world. In short, communication is causal because it exists in the world as marks, noises, and gestures: “language” is simply a theory we apply to those events after the fact. Therefore, as Yarbrough explains, rhetoricians might benefit from dropping terms like language and culture, and instead focus on discourse, “the human mode of interacting an environment, and environment *includes* things and people and the marks and noises they make to affect one another” (*Inventive* 14). *Discourse studies*, the term Yarbrough uses to describe the study of communicative interaction *after* rhetoric, seeks to “help others understand the objects of your own concerns, and to seek together the common causes of your questions and problems” (210).

Thus, interactionism provides an externalist definition of meaning that is necessarily collaborative, which implies the cooperation of at least two interlocutors. However, neither Davidson, nor Kent, nor Yarbrough, nor other externalist, focus on how this description of shared meaning might challenge or change the Burkean notion of

rhetorical identification. My goal is to do just that, but in order to move forward, one further theoretical roadblock needs to be removed: culture.

It should be clear by now that to avoid the problems of conceptual relativism, externalists challenge the very notion that conceptual schemes actually exist and serve as mediums through which people experience the world. As noted early in the chapter, Burke believed the characteristic feature of humanity was its symbol use, and this constant, ever changing, symbolic interaction created the grounds upon which human existence took place – the *substance* through which everyone moves. And while we seldom hear thinkers refer to “substance,” the concept nevertheless continues to function, only now we refer to substance as “culture.” As Yarbrough points out in *After Rhetoric*, our contemporary moment views “culture” as the *a priori* foundation through which we move, work, and communicate. Simply put, then, culture is yet another conceptual scheme, another name for the supposed gap that exists between subjective cognition and physical experience in the world. Even the most cursory glance of newspapers, magazines, and professional journals will demonstrate the centrality culture plays in our global discourse.

The question, of course, for me, a Western white male and privileged academic, is that in dismissing the concept of culture am I also dismissing the belief that authentic differences exist between people, differences currently attributed to culture? And, am I also dismissing, out of hand, that certain groups of people have historically aligned their beliefs with each other in response to particular environmental conditions? The answer to both questions is “no.” If we want to learn to discuss rhetorical empathy effectively, we

can no longer adhere to the belief that somehow a substance like culture determines everything about human discursive interaction. Do groups of people share particular beliefs about objects in the world? Of course, and they most likely share a sense of camaraderie because of these beliefs. However, sharing beliefs because of interactions with others in the world with objects is much different than claiming solidarity based on *a priori* substances that dictate action simply by virtue of birth in a particular location.

Continuing to believe that substances like “language” or “culture” exist will only result in further conflict and struggle. For every claim praising the notion of a “cultural identity,” an equal but negative claim could be made about the ethnocentrism implicit in believing that cultural groups determine our views about the world. Instead, I suggest that we drop the notion of culture altogether, and instead explore on how discursive interactionism provides a means for breaking down the boundaries between people. Simply put, my project argues, which is to say, I want to believe—I need to believe—that the erasing of cultural boundaries is possible because pragmatic empathy demonstrates that shared meaning *is a function of discourse*.⁶ If we choose to discourse with the other, we can know the other. Contributing misunderstanding to “cultural differences” is simply an apathetic response to the hard work of living, working, and speaking with others in a shared world.

Before we can move into a description of *pragmatic empathy* as the imperative interactionist methodology, we must first explore an interactionist account of belief. If, as Davidson suggests, triangulation names the process through which beliefs are made apparent, it seems crucial to extrapolate the epistemological implications of such a

position. In other words, what we *believe* about our beliefs will significantly determine our capacity to share them with others.

NOTES

1. See also: Richard Coe, “Classical and Rogerian Persuasion: An Archaeological/Ecological Explication”; Rebecca Stephens, “Rogerian Principles and the Invention Process”; and Richard E. Young, “Rogerian Argument and the Context of Situation: Taking a Closer Look.”

2. Cicero’s pedagogical focus in the *De Oratore* stems from his concern for the state. For Cicero, the responsibility to train rhetoricians to draw upon “the universal treasure-house of memory”—shared cultural values that undergird the nation-state—falls squarely on the shoulders of the pedagogue.

3. Burke’s conception of identification shares a great deal with postcolonial theorists’ conceptions of identity. For example, Kwame Anthony Appiah in his monograph *The Ethics of Identity* argues that “individuality presupposes sociability,” which results in “collective identities” (20-21). Moreover, these collective identities “are not just social because they involve others, but because they are constituted in part by socially transmitted conceptions of how a person of that identity properly behaves” (21). I bring this connection into focus to highlight the crucial role rhetorical theory can play, if rhetoricians so choose, in conversations about ethics and globalization.

4. As Dobrin's comments should make clear, postprocess scholars directly criticize the work of expressivists, particularly Peter Elbow. Also see Anis Bawarshi and Thomas Kent.

5. In *After Rhetoric*, Stephen R. Yarbrough defines discursive power as "the crediting of rhetorical force": "a speaker gains power to the extent that others credit his or her ability to persuade still others to credit him or her with force, rhetorical or actual"(23). While there is not room in my current project to explore the implications of Yarbrough's claim, these ideas do represent an important departure point for further discussions concerning power and resistance in the classroom.

6. John Tibebu Pell, July 2, 2009.

CHAPTER III

THE CRISIS OF COMMITMENTS

“We cannot live or think at all without some degree of faith. Faith is synonymous with a working hypothesis.”

William James
“The Sentiment of Rationality”

While the central aim of this project is to redefine empathy and intersubjective meaning in light of discourse studies / discursive interactionism, such a project requires a redefinition of what it means for interlocutors to *hold a belief*. Intersubjective truth, the outcome of discursive triangulation, implies that parties involved in interlocution can and do identify *meaning*—they know when and what they believe. This implies, then, that interlocutors approach discursive situations with particular beliefs about how discourse proceeds. As Kevin J. Porter argues in *Meaning, Language and Time*, rhetoric and composition studies often extol the critique of beliefs and the social contexts responsible for their construction, but seldom do rhetoricians define what they mean by *meaning*. Instead of examining the constitutive characteristics of discursive situations, like what it means *to believe*, social constructionism critiques the ideologies shaping beliefs, and “generates its own evidence and grounds for communication” as a means to support its conclusions (Porter, “Methods” 427). Thus, the social turn in rhetoric and composition *always already* provides the evidence of its own efficacy, and thereby falls into what Dasenbrock calls “a cozy communal solipsism” (“Truth” 560). Consequently, my current

project, which aims to challenge and change beliefs is doomed to fail... *unless* I first articulate an alternative understanding of what it means to enter into discourse with the beliefs we hold. In other words, before I can offer an interactionist description of what it means to “share meaning” I must first provide an alternative, interactionist definition of belief, a definition that accounts for the possibility that beliefs may be shareable.

As Davidson, Dasenbrock, Kent, and Yarbrough make clear, social constructionism, because of its reliance on conceptual schemes like language and culture, cannot offer a description of belief that allows for the sharing of meaning. *Discursive interactionism*, however, provides the theoretical foundation for an alternative definition of what it means to hold a belief. Drawing together the work of *interactionists* and the North American pragmatists, I argue that beliefs are best understood as *commitments*—*active* contingent, and mutable sets of topical relationships, pragmatically and historically formed in response to particular discursive conditions. To hold a belief, I contend, is simply another way of saying that we are committed to engaging a discursive situation in a particular fashion, but these commitments necessarily change and adapt *if* we want to function, as Davidson suggests, as the interpreter of our interlocutor. That is, to share meaning is not something done to beliefs; rather, *sharing meaning is* what it means to have a *belief*. Of course, such a position requires an interactionist definition of belief, which is to say, a new meaning of *meaning*.

The Problem of Beliefs: Conceptual Schemes and Static Meaning

When speakers suppose that meaning derives from conceptual schemes they encounter a number of insurmountable problems with respect to the prospect of sharing meaning with others. While this project is particularly concerned with the ethnocentrism characteristic of appeals made to conceptual schemes, this problem is systemic of the larger problem of how social constructionism understands the notion of *belief*. As Yarbrough notes in *After Rhetoric*, the traditional, “Platonic,” view of discourse claims that “‘reality’ exists prior to our discussions about it” and therefore, the aim of communication “is to discover the configurations of that reality and persuade other to accept them” (51). Traditionally, then, rhetoric’s goals have been to persuade others that one version of reality is more “real” than alternative versions of reality, and agreement about versions of reality will be beneficial to continued, and hopefully, cooperative existence of the parties involved in the discursive exchange.

However, as Yarbrough makes clear, interactionism is not a “contemporary” approach (read: poststructuralist) to discourse. A contemporary approach to discourse, Yarbrough argues, assumes that “discourse is always already open,” and the proper aim of discourse, and thereby rhetoric, is to “persuade others to disregard or deconstruct every structurally intact field of discursive play one should run across” (52). The interactionist view of discourse, however, is that “reality,” when understood as a description of experience mediated through conceptual schemes like language and culture, exerts force on our interactions with each other because speakers accept these schemes and the propositional beliefs associated with them. Therefore, “because people credit them

[concepts like language and culture] and act upon them, they are part of the way things are. They cannot be simply dismissed” (54). In other words, people have beliefs, and these beliefs are credited with the capacity to shape our discursive decisions. Thus, rather than continuing to critique how speakers employ discourse in order to articulate their beliefs, I believe it more beneficial to change our definitions of *how beliefs arise and are maintained during discourse* and thereby make our theoretical approaches toward discourse compatible with concepts like sharing meaning.

The difficulty in making this argument, however, lies in rhetoric and composition studies’ historical reliance on notions like conceptual schemes to explain how interlocutors hold beliefs. As I argued in the previous chapter, rhetoric and composition studies primarily view the study of discourse as a hermeneutical act.¹ To develop a rhetorical presence, in this model, is primarily an interpretive endeavor where the individual attempts to locate the *meaning* of a discourse by locating the cultural and linguistic schemes shaping an interlocutor’s communicative practices. Supposedly, then, once a person learns to effectively interpret texts she will be capable of constructing her own discourses that adequately account for the schemes shaping every part of the discursive exchange.

For rhetoric and composition studies the term “writing process” most readily describes the ways beliefs are perceived to develop as writers learn to interpret the schemes shaping discourse. Broadly conceived, the writing process signifies the means by which writers learn to communicate effectively in a given context by learning, as David Bartholomae suggests, “the commonplaces,” or linguistic habits and practices

relevant to a particular group. Thomas Kent provides a clear example of the typical understanding of how the writing process shapes our view of beliefs, or at least how we come to understand beliefs rhetorically, when he writes, “In most writing and reading courses, instructors usually assume that they teach a body-of-knowledge, knowledge that is organized by a predictive theory of composition or literary theory” (“Paralogic” 35). Kent’s use of the term “predictive” illustrates the assumption that beliefs exist as bodies-of-knowledge that develop interpretively in a predictable fashion. As Kent concludes, in believing that a person can “discover, in some predictable way, what it is she wants to say and how to say it, we mistakenly assume that a fit, link, or convention exists between the different hermeneutic strategies employed by both writer and their reader,” and by assuming this link exists or can be constructed we have little hope of understanding why miscommunication occurs, other than simply assuming the author or the reader did not adequately learn the body-of-knowledge necessary for interpreting the particular discursive event (36).

Kent’s critique is similar to the one given by Donna Qualley in her monograph *Turns of Thoughts: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry*. Here Qualley argues that the perceived efficacy of the writing process promotes “teaching methods of composing” that value writers placing “preformulated ideas together in acceptable or standard forms, without also teaching students how to examine the implications of their compositions” (4). Both Kent and Qualley, then, highlight the problems of an overly formulaic notion of the writing process, the same problem Davidson sees in all appeals to conceptual schemes. Insofar as they assume that all discursive acts derive from conceptual schemes

and that effective rhetorics are those that correctly interpret the media shaping discourse, interlocutors can account for neither their misunderstanding of one another nor the consequences of their beliefs. Interlocutors, when relying on notions like “process” can only assume that they are unable to share meaning with others because they have not adequately mastered the appropriate interpretive process necessary for understanding their partner.

While social constructionists like Kenneth Bruffee, Stanley Fish, Karen Burke LeFevre, and Richard Rorty appear to offer more nuanced understandings of how conceptual schemes shape the discursive practices that shape beliefs, they remain entrenched in the notion of process because they are firmly committed to the notion that language mediates between the self and the world, that is, they remain committed to social constructionism. The social constructionist position, John Trimbur suggests, influences the “social turn” in rhetoric and composition studies, which continues to shape the field, even though it appears under a number of monikers. Kent summarizes the constructionist position in the following way: “what we know is determined by or is relative to the community in which we live” (426). Thus, to communicate effectively with others, in and out of our discourse communities, requires that we interpret the “social issues” that shape discourse and can supposedly “be addressed through systematic analysis” (Lindquist 190). Determining the “linguistic” and “cultural” issues shaping discourse is a social “process,” according to the prevailing assumption. That is, interlocutors can learn the particular communication practices of a particular community through a process of analysis and interpretation, even though these practices are

understood to vary from person to person and change over time. Regardless, then, of the complexity of the definition, a constructionist view of discourse is incapable of providing a description of how meaning is shared. In fact, because conceptual schemes are unique and mutable, the real question is whether or not social construction can offer anything in the way of understanding how we share meaning.

Summarily, then, the thrust of most contemporary rhetorical scholarship is that communal communicative practices change over time, and that an individual's adaptation of these practices is also wholly unique and irreducible to a foundational knowledge derived from the community of origin. Unfortunately, this view attempts to maintain a belief in two contradictory positions. As noted above (and at length in the previous chapter) contemporary scholarship appeals to the notion of discourse communities, while at the same time promoting a belief in individual agency that suggests each speaker develops a unique application and presentation of discourse which derives from their "memberships" in particular communities (Bleich 53). David Bleich attempts to summarize this paradox when he writes, "People's literacies and language uses reflect their different sets of memberships in society. How and what one reads and writes are governed by interpersonal and collective conditions" (53). Furthermore, "Study of different groups of literary respondents shows that even in seemingly homogeneous groups of readers the differences of perception, emphasis, and value among individual readers are so various as to defeat any attempt to predict similar responses" (55). Thus, like Kent, Bleich doubts that rhetoric and composition provides writers the means to learn a body-of-knowledge that can predict particular discursive outcomes; however, unlike

Davidson, Kent, and especially Yarbrough, Bleich's statements remain firmly ensconced in the belief that language functions as a medium between the world and the self, or in Bleich's own words, "individual identities are connected to how we already speak and write and what we read" (55). Bleich words fall in line with Krista Ratcliffe, who claims that language is both representational (it "represents that which already exists") and "generative" (it "generates that which does not yet exist or is not yet named") (9). In other words, our beliefs, even though unique from others, still derive from the particular adaptations of social conventions and norms. And, since our beliefs derive from conceptual schemes like "language" or "culture" all that we can know is that which we can represent in our language.

The problems associated with linguistic representation remains the focus of literary scholarship and critical study today. My work, though, is not to continue the post-structuralist's critique of whether or not language represents the world accurately – I have no desire to continue with such a fruitless project. Rather, I reference the problem of propositional beliefs based on a representational view of language to demonstrate a crucial, but often misunderstood condition of discursive interactionism: beliefs are necessarily contingent, mutable, and require triangulation in order to be meaningful. That is, speakers approach a discursive situation with particular *commitments*—prior theories of how they expect to understand and be understood by their interlocutor. These commitments, I will demonstrate, are similar to what rhetoricians, at least since Aristotle, have called *topoi*. However, from the perspective of discursive interactionism, commitments are never absolute. Rather, commitments name how we expect to proceed

during communicative intercourse. These beliefs, however, will, to varying degrees, adapt, evolve and change during “the process of constant correction,” a key characteristic of the experience of triangulation (Yarbrough, *Inventive* 8). Interlocutors, then, do not develop *commitments* through a predictive interpretive process; rather, *commitments* exist as a response to the particular problems of specific discursive situations. In the simplest terms, all knowing is fluid and represents particular responses to specific environmental conditions.

As Davidson, Kent, Yarbrough and others demonstrate, post-structuralists have sufficiently explicated the problems associated with language as a representational medium capable of accurately describing our experiences in the world. Ironically, however, theorists seem hesitant to drop the notion that language *is a representational medium*, even though they claim it cannot effectively perform this function.

Therefore, rhetoricians remain locked in a contradictory position. On the one hand, social constructionism holds that all discourse, and thereby our identities, are assumed to “correspond to our personal, social, and more recently, political theories of discourse” (Weisser, “Ecomposition” 81). Thus, as Anis Bawarshi argues, “We are constantly in the process of reproducing our contexts as we communicate within them, speaking and writing about our realities and ourselves to the extent that discourse and reality cannot be separated” (“Ecology” 71). Our discourse is social in the sense that it derives from both specific locations² and specific conventions³, but, as Krista Ratcliffe points out, “What complicates matters is that symbolic systems often house competing cultural logics” (10). So, on the other hand, social constructionists hold that idiosyncratic

practices of the individual complicate arguments for the communal nature of discourse. Consequently, while social constructionists—whether understood as genre theorists, postcolonial thinkers, ecocompositionists, or even the new wave of rhetorical historians working to uncover the ideologies at work in the writing programs of yesteryear (see: Gold, Ritter)—attempt to complicate the traditional and naïve notions of process thinking, they nonetheless remain mired in the idea that speakers *must* internalize particular conceptual schemes before communicating with others. Or, as Yarbrough describes the constructionist problem, “How can we know whether the terminology we are using to describe an aspect of (outside) reality actually fits or corresponds in structure to that reality when the structure of the language was in place (inside) before we noticed that aspect?” (*Inventive* 7).

From this perspective, then, misunderstandings arise because interlocutors cannot share the same beliefs. Since all speakers interact with discourse differently, they may share a few syntactical or grammatical conventions, but, as Davidson notes, from this perspective “what counts as real in one system may not in another” (*Essential* 196). From a constructionist point of view, at best, communicative intercourse allows interlocutors to recognize how their discourse use varies from others as a result of their interactions with economic, political, and social institutions (see: Berlin, Crowley, Lee, Miller). Therefore, when interlocutors find themselves in a discursive conflict – when our responses to an object differ from those of the other—the only explanation interlocutors have for these misunderstandings is the appeal to the notion that all we can ever know is that we can never know the object of the other’s intention. Interlocutors can never share meaning

about objects or create meaningful identifications because beliefs about the objects in the world derive from language, and language is idiosyncratic, inaccurate, and for the most part cannot be shared.

The problem with beliefs, then, of course, *is believing* that they work as the theorists above imagine. If our beliefs form through particular interactions with conceptual schemes, like language and culture, and the goal of communication is to share meaning with others by composing accurate representations of the world and its objects, then it would seem that such goals are bound to fail. We can never share meaning since conceptual schemes of any sort are incapable of allowing us to do so. Moreover, if beliefs derive from language and are presented through language, then it seems unlikely that traditional notions of communication provide a means through which beliefs can be changed in response to the other since speakers arrive at the communicative situation with beliefs *always already malformed*. Thus, even if the sharing of meaning were possible, which, according to thinkers like Derrida, is improbable, it would require as Davidson says “massive conceptual change” (*Essential* 196). That is, to share beliefs would require speakers to share the same conceptual scheme, a process that would entail the transference of the bodies of knowledge and experience that influences a speaker’s communicative practices to the internal mental states of another speaker. To share beliefs would require that speakers share conceptual schemes, which implies that speakers would have to share the same experiences, languages, and cultures.

Of course, if, as teachers of rhetoric and composition, we want to continue believing that the study of communication can help us avoid the perils of discursive

conflict, and make disagreements and misunderstandings generative rather than destructive, I think we should heed Yarbrough's provocative claim: "language and culture are hypotheses unnecessary for understanding discourse except to the extent that people credit them" (*After* 54). In other words, what we believe about discourse matters, and if we continue to remain locked in the notion that language and culture shape our views of the world *and*, therefore, rhetoric names the methods by which we persuade the other to believe our inaccurate representations of the world, it seems any way forward is not only frivolous but potentially damaging. That is, discursive conflicts will continue to be squelched through force and violence, while the authentic sharing of meaning remains a theoretical impossibility. However, if rhetoricians drop appeals to conceptual schemes, like language and culture, and instead re-conceive of our beliefs as *commitments*, the contingent, mutable, and collaborative *topoi* that influence our discursive actions in the world, then the sharing of meaning is not only possible, it is inevitable. That is, from the perspective of discursive interactionism, *beliefs arise and exist during the process of sharing*.

Commitments: A Pragmatic Understanding of Belief

I want to conclude by arguing for an alternative understanding of belief: meanings arise and exist during *discursive interaction* with another interlocutive being and an object of common cause. A reconsideration of the aims of rhetoric and composition studies in light of *discourse studies* begins with the crucial definition of *commitments*, the term I use to name both the continually emergent beliefs interlocutors hold and employ

during discursive interaction, and the resultant beliefs of previous discursive encounters with which interlocutors initiate future discursive interactions. Each speaker approaches the other with expectations about what types of rhetorical maneuvers will help facilitate understanding about the objects of concern, *and* those rhetorical maneuvers they expect would lead to misunderstanding.⁴ In short, commitments are made known during discourse; they exist in and affect the world as interlocutors triangulate.

“Commitments,” as a critical term for the beliefs that people construct via discourse, draws heavily from two strands of thinking. First commitments are similar in nature to what Davidson calls a *prior theory*. Second, commitments are pragmatic, in the sense that they indicate *how* speakers have previously navigated the world and how they *anticipate* doing so in the future. Or, to paraphrase William James and C.S. Peirce, commitments name the rules of action we are willing to follow in a given situation. Rhetorically, commitments name the topical relationships we see as relevant to a particular discursive situation. However, commitments are not static, nor do they derive from *a priori* bodies of knowledge. Commitments, I argue, are better understood as a *stance toward the objects of discourse* – the pragmatic orientation toward the world that suggests beliefs are better understood as *believings*, active, methodological approaches to discursive interaction initiated by the “perception of differences” between speakers, or to borrow from Yarbrough, *believings* names the process of “inquiry about the causes of the differences we perceive” (Yarbrough, *After* 9). Interlocutors, I contend, may choose to approach discourse with the notion that their discursive beliefs are wholly interactive – all believing occurs because we interact with others and our world. Therefore, creating

meaning and establishing beliefs are part of the same contingent and temporally bound project.

Prior Theories

While Davidson's concept of triangulation provides a description of how discourse occurs, it does not explain how previous discourse experiences influence a speaker's utterances with which she initiates a discursive event with another. Communicative intercourse, as Davidson makes clear, is always a discreet and unique event, but these events do not, as Bakhtin remarks, represent speakers disturbing "the external silence of the universe" (951). Rather, speakers approach discursive encounters with the beliefs, intentions, and attitudes, developed during previous triangulations—these anticipations derived from prior external acts of discourse are what Davidson refers to as a *prior theory*. An interlocutor's prior theories develop from previous communication events. Prior theories, then, indicate previous discursive experiences with others and objects, but these prior experiences have little affect on future interactions. According to Davidson, "for the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker.... For the speaker, the prior theory is what he *believes* the interpreter's priory theory to be" (261). Prior theories are something like a speaker's "basic linguistic competence," which a speaker "shares with those with whom he communicates" (261). In other words, speakers' prior theories are helpful insofar as they identify the beliefs, intentions, and attitudes derived previously and these propositional attitudes will no doubt affect the initial marks, noises and gestures, a

speaker uses to direct the attention of another toward the objects of discourse; however, “what interpreter and speaker share, to the extent that communication succeeds, is not learned and so is not a language governed by rules or conventions known to the speaker and interpreter in advance” but what is shared is the “passing theory” (264). For Davidson, knowing the other and sharing meaning occur as *passing theories* emerge through discourse.

Whereas prior theories represent the ways in which speakers intend to discourse *preceding* the actual discursive event, *passing theories* represent the discursive moves enacted as communication *proceeds*. “The passing theory,” Davidson writes, “is how he [the interpreter] *does* interpret the utterance” of his interlocutor and for the speaker the passing theory describes the interpretive theory she “*intends* the interpreter to use” (260-261). Thus, the passing theory names “where agreement is greatest” between interlocutors (261). Triangulation, then, names the “cast of characters” involved in a discursive interaction, while the *passing theory* describes the phase of discourse in which interlocutors recognize they are in fact responding to the same objects in a shared world. From Davidson’s perspective, effective communication does not require sharing a common language, culture, or conceptual scheme in advance; rather, effective communication depends upon the ability of interlocutors to recognize how they each use marks, noises and gestures in response to objects, and thereby understanding describes the phase of discourse where speakers’ gestures are similar enough to direct the partner’s attention toward the same objects. When interlocutors begin to understand each other they have entered into a passing theory, which provides the mechanism by which their

discursive acts allow them to know the other's beliefs, the objects in a shared world, and their own beliefs.

From Davidson's perspective, sharing meaning with the other, creating *discursive identifications*, does not occur prior to discursive interactions, but arises during interaction. Davidson makes this point clear when he writes: "For two people to know of each other that they are so related, that their thoughts are so related, requires that they be in communication" ("Second Person" 121). Communication, defined by triangulation, "begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects" (*Essential* 236). Yarbrough summarizes Davidson's minimal theory of shared meaning as follows: "to understand what an utterance means is to understand the conditions that make it true" ("Modes" 495). In this way, triangulation not only represents a causal definition of discourse, but a pragmatic one as well. To understand that meaning derives from the "process of discursive revision that continues until the responses that interlocutors receive are the responses they expect" (Yarbrough *Inventive* 23), is no different than Charles Sanders Peirce's definition of pragmatism: "Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearing you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your conception of those effects is the *whole* of your conception of the object" (192). To share meaning from the perspective of a discursive interactionist means to experience discourse holistically – environmental conditions, objects, and others make our world and beliefs known to us. Once we triangulate with an interlocutor, "we sufficiently understand someone's utterances or some understands ours – we consequently know the mind of

another, the world we share, and, of course, our own mind” (Kent “On the Very Idea” 434).

Davidson’s causal definition of communication begins with a description of the *prior theories* speakers hold as they approach a discursive situation. Since I believe Davidson when he contends that an interactionist view of communication erases “the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally,” it might be relevant to present a non-linguistic, or “worldly” example of how prior theories influence our approach to the discursive situation (*Essential* 265). Take a backpacker for example. After completing her day’s hiking, the backpacker decides to pitch her tent for the evening. Given her previous experiences, she is *committed* to not only pitching her tent correctly but also using guy-lines to create a taut and more storm resistant shelter. However, her commitment to using these techniques does not prepare her for the particular conditions she encounters. Perhaps the soil is too soft for a stake to stay firmly planted, or perhaps she is pitching her tent on a granite outcropping and she will be unable to use stakes at all. Regardless of the situation, her commitment to properly “staking” her tent depends upon the particular environmental conditions she encounters. Thus, a belief in a particular way of pitching a tent is less helpful than *believing*, that is, actively adapting a commitment to address the particular conditions of the situation.

This is not to say that our prior experiences are unhelpful for getting around in the world; they are extremely important. Our prior theories, however, cannot account for the conditions influencing a particular situation. Our commitments are, as Kent argues of

prior theories, “always embodied interpretations” (“Paralogic” 26). In other words, since discourse is causal and occurs in the world, the commitment to “stake down the tent” is neither true nor false unto itself; rather staking down the tent names the unique interaction, which is influenced by the conditions in which the discourse is carried out. Or, in terms of rhetoric and composition, “to write an essay” only becomes meaningful when understood as part of a dynamic interaction between speakers and objects in a particular environment under a specific set of conditions. We cannot, as Kent and Yarbrough explain, predict precisely how discourse will proceed prior to entering into the specific discursive context. All we have are our best guesses, our previous experiences and encounters, which make up our prior theories.

The challenge for many rhetoricians encountering Davidson and his notion of *prior theories* results from a misunderstanding of what Davidson calls his “all-out externalist” view of language. Davidson’s externalism recognizes that “there are connections everywhere between the world and the contents of our thoughts” (Kent, “Language Philosophy” 6). Our thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes are verified in the experience of discourse. Discursive interaction with others in the world makes our thoughts, beliefs and attitudes known to us. “In fact,” emphasizes Davidson, “I would say if it weren’t for that [verification of our thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes requires intersubjectivity], we wouldn’t be able to interpret anyone else. It’s only because we share a world with others that we can get the hang of what they are talking about” (Kent, “Language Philosophy 7). Davidson gives the following example as a way of illustrating this concept: Imagine a person alone in the world – “that is, not in communication with

anyone else” – and he is enjoying a peach. If that person were asked what he is enjoying, he would most likely say the peach. However, if the person had no one to communicate with what would stop him from answering that his taste buds were providing the joy, or an event that occurred a thousand years previous that set the forces in motion that impinged on his taste buds. Alone, the person eating the peach would find “no answer to that question at all: nothing for him to check up on, no way to raise the question, much less to answer it” (8). Thus, Davidson concludes, the only way to understand our beliefs, the ways we intend to think or act in a particular context, is through communicative interaction with others. The only way we know that the peach is the source of pleasurable taste is because we can *triangulate* with another who responds to the same object. Thus, our *prior theories*, arise from experiences of triangulation, which is another way of saying that our beliefs are pragmatic: they arise as a response to the exigencies of particular discursive problems.

As Davidson makes clear, our beliefs develop as a result of interactions with others in the world *and* our beliefs are made meaningful, that is, recognized, during interaction. Our beliefs, then, are contingent in the sense that they adapt, change and evolve depending upon the particular conditions under which they are employed. It is this condition that leads Davidson to conclude that our beliefs are made objective as a result of intersubjectivity. The actions we take toward objects in the world illustrates the beliefs we hold toward them; actions become meaningful as we interact with others who can respond to the same stimuli and thus verify our intentions. From this perspective then, our beliefs organize in “pragmatic relations that develop from the processes of our

interactions with others and with the objects of our common concern in a world we can come to share” (Yarbrough, “Passing Theories” 72).

From Prior Theories to Commitments

Davidson’s description of *prior theories* provides little in the way of application. This lack of clarification leads to some authors, like genre theorist Anis Bawarshi, to misconstrue the concept and treat *prior theories* as static bodies of knowledge, or genres (see: Bawarshi, Bazerman and Meadway, Devitt and Russell) that shape the objects of common concern encountered by speakers during discursive interaction. Bawarshi’s account, based on genre theory (a particular type of social constructionism) differs from Davidson’s account of *prior theories*, which asserts that objects become objects for us because of sharing *passing theories*.

In his essay “Beyond Dichotomy: Toward a Theory of Divergence in Composition Studies,” Bawarshi intends to offer a description of how speakers move from their *prior theories* to the sharing of a *passing theory*. Bawarshi grounds his adaptations of Davidson’s ideas in both genre theory and the social constructionism of Thomas Kuhn and Robert-Alain de Beaugrande. Bawarshi is valiant in his attempt to describe the interaction between prior and passing theories in the traditional terms of rhetorical study, but his explanation of how prior theories affect discursive interaction diverges from Davidson’s causal understanding of communication in drastic fashion specifically because he maintains a belief in genres as “conceptual schemes.” Bawarshi’s reading of Davidson is unable to avoid the central tenet of social constructionism – the

notion that all knowledge derives from some type of conceptual scheme that mediates between the self and world. Bawarshi, even though he is working with Davidson's theories, cannot avoid appealing to conceptual schemes. He makes this clear when he writes, "Genres," which function for Bawarshi as what Kent calls a "thin formulation" of social constructionism, "mediate to a great extent our experience of the world, determining our motives, what we deem valuable, and how we communicate these motives and values" (78).⁵ Genres, Bawarshi argues, "are dynamically linked to the way we conceptualize, order, and change, our world" (78). Therefore, "generic conventions linger with us from one communicative moment to the next, in many ways *reconstituting every passing communicative act* with vestiges of a prior one" (78). Bawarshi, therefore, concludes, "Every communicative act...is not 'passing' but divergent" (80). In other words, the actual communicative event may involve the use of generic devices in ways speakers may not have intended; all discourse, however, even if it *diverges* from the speaker's prior theories, will, nonetheless, be the product of schemes that shape both a speaker's use of marks, noises and gestures and her interpretation of the other's use of marks, noises and gestures.

While I appreciate Bawarshi's continued commitment to engage the most pressing issues facing rhetoric and composition studies, his remarks nonetheless demonstrate why Davidson, Kent, and Yarbrough and others like Kevin J. Porter, Matthew Sned, and William Duffy, remain committed interactionists and thereby hold to a view of meaning that arises in the external interactions of people and things: appeals to genres, language, culture or discourse communities necessarily maintain the distinction between what an

object means and what an object is. In other words, if genres “reconstitute” passing theories then meaning is found not in the *passing* but in the *prior*, and again, there is no way to know if speakers are interacting with the same object or simply using their own idiosyncratic schemes to render the other as a version of the self. Thus, regardless of how dynamic, nuanced, and unique one imagines genres, discourse communities, or ecosystems to be, appealing to these notions simply reinforces the view that meaning develops via mediation.

Yarbrough, however, offers a fully interactional definition of beliefs. In brief, Yarbrough is capable of providing such a definition because he understands beliefs to be causal and pragmatic in the same ways as our discursive acts. For Yarbrough, the movement from *prior theories* to a *passing theory* is a heuristic process “always at once a provisional solution to the problem of how the speaker believes his discursive partners will interpret him, as well as a question (even when not in question form) to those partners about the interpretability of the utterance” (“Passing Theories” 76). In other words, since meaning develops during “cooperative human interactions with shared objects in a common world” our use of discourse to make these beliefs clear to others is also a problem solving exercise – speakers using marks, noises and gestures so that they come to share meaning about the same objects.

However, since discursive interactionism views all meaning as occurring externally and intersubjectively, the sharing of beliefs is also an interactive process. That is, our beliefs are better understood as *believings*, expectations we have toward particular objects as a result of the historical conditions under which we encountered them.

Therefore, my *believings* about the statement “Jack was misguided” has nothing to do with the representational nature of the words in the sentence, but everything to do with conditions in which the utterance occurred. So, Jack’s being misguided means something different when uttered following an angry outburst by Jack during a staff meeting as opposed to hearing the statement with regards to my father-in-law’s frustration over his expensive, guided fishing trip. These utterances, and what I believe them to mean, involves understanding the relationships between my interlocutor’s words, the object of common cause, and my own discourse. Or, in Yarbrough’s words, “objects are constituted” as a result of “relationships of historical problematic situations,” so, for example, “Finding out what a chair means, what a chair is, and what to do with a chair and the word ‘chair’ are exactly the same process” (84, 85).

It would be foolish, of course, to claim that we approach each discursive encounter *tabla rosa*: “We each have in memory, of course, a repertoire of topical configurations associated with previously encountered situations, and having these – particularly sharing these with our interlocutor – speeds up the inferential process of triangulation. But these *do not fully constitute* [or, as Bawarshi argues *re-constitute*] what we eventually triangulate” (86). Thus, as an interactionist, I agree with Yarbrough when he concludes, “No system of language constitutes the objects to which signs can refer; words and other signs refer to the relations that have determined the objects we notice as relevant to the task of solving problems with others” (84).

Yarbrough, then, offers an interactionist understanding of the movement between *prior* and *passing*; it is a problem-solving process that involves interlocutors’ recursive

adjustments to another's discourse with regards to an object of common concern. These adjustments – the movement from *prior theories* to a *passing theory* – Davidson, Kent, and Yarbrough all make clear, cannot be anticipated prior to the discursive situation. This, of course, is no different from the backpacker who will not be able to say how she will stake the tent until she begins doing so at the campsite. In other words, Davidson, Kent, and Yarbrough all work from the position that to change our beliefs in response to the objects of our shared world does not involve massive “conceptual change” – the notion that for us to interact with the world differently would require that we somehow come to perceive the world in a radically new fashion.

Rather, the adaptations we make as we discourse with the other are possible because our beliefs themselves are interactive. Or as Yarbrough suggests, our beliefs name our “apperception of a [discursive] situation's social relations” (*Inventive* 171). Our beliefs represent the specific answers speakers employ in particular discursive situations to end the discord between expectations and experience. Yarbrough summarizes this view when he writes, “*Change the conditions and you change how you can interact with things; change the interaction and you change the relevant relations; change the relations and you change the things themselves*” (140). Our beliefs, then, exist in only in the *believing*, a pragmatic position originally expressed in the writing of C.S. Peirce and William James and their proto-interactionist definition of belief.

In “What Pragmatism Means” William James writes “The most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing.... To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic” (149). James' statement finds agreement

with Davidson's critique of Thomas Kuhn and his assertion that bodies-of-knowledge only change as a result of radical conceptual change. Briefly, Kuhn's position, which plays a significant role in the development of social constructionism, contends that since our beliefs derive from unique conceptual schemes, ideas that arise outside of those schemes are only "translatable" if people embrace new perspective of the world, which, according to Kuhn, means a person would have to leave the world she currently occupies and move to inhabit another. Davidson, of course, argues that Kuhn's position is self-refuting primarily because Kuhn, like so many thinkers, maintains the distinction between beliefs (the function of conceptual schemes) and the world (where experiences supposedly make representation necessary).⁶ Davidson, however, does not believe that meaning derives from conceptual schemes; rather, meaning, and thereby belief, are part of the discursive process and arise during these processes.

Davidson's understanding of belief is essentially the same as C. S. Peirce's definition of belief in "How To Make Our Ideas Clear." A belief, Peirce writes, "is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or...a *habit*" (28). Therefore, "the essence of belief is the establishment of a habit" (29). Our beliefs, then, name our *believing* about objects in the world and how we intend to interact with them. These rules of actions, or habits, develop as we attempt the cessation of the "irritation of doubt," Peirce's phrase that describes the "inadequacy of a currently held belief (or habitual response) to a situation at hand" (Yarbrough, "Passing Theories" 77). Peirce's pragmatism, like Davidson's post-analytic philosophy, both support views of belief that

are “plastic” and relationally bound – beliefs are answers (habits of action) to specific questions (contingent, temporally bound, and environmentally influenced exigencies).

This view of beliefs as bound relationally finds its roots, Yarbrough argues, in the rhetorical concept of *topoi*. For rhetoricians, “The alternative rules of action or habits that we may or may not find appropriate guides to our discursive behavior in a particular situation are,” Yarbrough purports, “precisely the same thing that the ancient Greek Sophists, rhetoricians, and philosophers called the *topoi*” (“Passing Theories” 78). And while “modern commentators, translators, and theorists give...divergent definitions” of *topoi*, Yarbrough nonetheless finds Donavan J. Ochs definition compatible with interactionism’s pragmatist understanding of belief. The *topoi*, Ochs concludes, are best understood as the specifics of a particular type of relationship (qtd. in Yarbrough 79). In essence, the *topoi*, or topics, are not rhetorical arguments in themselves, but instead name particular discursive answers to particular discursive problems. Thus, for the interactionist, the classical Greek notion of *topos*, the place or site, “the realm in which the rhetor thinks and acts” (Cosigny qtd. in Yarbrough 82) functions as a means to link Davidson’s notion of *prior* and *passing theories* to the disciplinary projects historically associated with rhetoric.

In other words, interlocutors approach discursive situations with pragmatically and historically informed *habits*—recurrent ways of deploying topical relationships. However, these *habits* (or *prior theories*) do not determine the meaning that interlocutors will share in actual discourse. I quote Yarbrough at length because he offers a clear (albeit complex) explanation of this position by looking at a hypothetical discursive

exchange between interlocutors. In the exchange Yarbrough describes, interlocutors encounter “discursive conflict,” which is to say they “perceive different problems and therefore different *topoi* govern their discourse” (“Passing” 86):

The topical relations that are relevant to the situation for her (alone) do not match those that are relevant for me (alone), but our need to cooperate makes it necessary for each of us to merge into a shared topical landscape – my problem becomes a problem for solving her problem, and vice versa – and so further discourse ensues. That is, now each of us must take into account the different *topoi* that determine what she and I perceive to be problems within our shared situation. (86-87)

Yarbrough’s definition of *topoi* as sets of relationships offers a fully interactionist explanation of how interlocutors move from *prior theories* to *passing theories*, without making Bawarshi’s mistake of appealing to conceptual schemes. To claim a belief, then, is to be in the act of *believing*, which is to say the process of discursive interaction with another with whom we share the world and its objects.

Thus, we are now at a place to define beliefs as pragmatic and intersubjective. Beliefs are a phase of discourse, identified during the contingent, mutable, and temporally bound context of discursive interaction. This description of belief provides discursive interaction with a clear sense of what interlocutors “bring” with them to the discursive situation, without appealing to *a priori* conceptual schemes like language or culture as the determining factors of discourse. My concerns, however, are not purely theoretical. As a teacher of rhetoric and composition I believe that discursive interaction provides a description of communication that effectively addresses the exigencies of globalization. However, as a teacher, my work is primarily with students and often

students with little (if any) prior exposure to rhetoric, philosophy, and literary theory; therefore, these students would find the above definition of belief intimidating. Moreover, in many ways the above description of belief remains theoretical in the sense that most of us have not identified the relationships that comprise our believing. This of course, as should be clear, is not an indictment of anyone's thinking; rather, our discursive interactions in the world do not require us to take into account all the relationships that comprise our beliefs; instead our beliefs "cohere associated in groups or clusters" (Yarbrough, *Inventive* 115). For example "to believe the 'cat is black' is to believe that 'cats exists' as well as to believe 'black is a color'; and to believe 'cats have fur' is to believe 'cats are mammals' and on and on" (115). Clearly, when we speak of cats we do not run through the entire gambit of beliefs associated with cats. Rather, we tend to only focus on those relationships *that seem* most relevant to the discursive situation at hand. As Yarbrough writes, "our beliefs become associated as a consequence of our discursive interactions in concrete situations with the objects our beliefs are about" (115). In other words, "how we order our beliefs depends upon the questions we have had to ask and the problems we have had to solve" (116).

This final point is crucial to developing pedagogical practices that address "a culture increasingly fractured and polarized" by the ever increasing diversity of people's discursive habits (Qually, *Turns of Thought* 5). As a discursive interactionist, I do not believe that changing our beliefs requires radical conceptual change; in fact, I am suspicious of the notion that when we highlight the over-simplicity of clichés and commonplaces we are necessarily asking students to drastically change their *whole view*

of the world. Instead, I argue, when teachers highlight the limitations of commonplaces and clichés, we are encouraging students to notice the myriad of relationships between the objects and beliefs of a shared world. In short, all of us, especially first-year writing students, hold unexamined beliefs.

Teachers of rhetoric and composition see this all the time. A student interprets a phrase or a clause in a way that challenges a more literal reading of the text. For example, the student is not sure why, but he definitely disagrees with the President's position on a particular issue, and we often see students' frustrations when we ask them to elaborate on why they hold these opinions. Too often, teachers view these frustrations as "developmental challenges," or cognitive disassociations, problems cured with exposure to more critical exercises and scholarly texts. Or, as Kent writes, "The idea here is that students can be led to see the truth – or knowledge, facts, certainties, ideas, concepts, universals, timeless categories, systems of thought, or the like – through open-ended discussion that results in the discovery of new knowledge on the part of the students" ("Externalism" 69). In other words, students develop clarity of thinking by replacing underdeveloped beliefs with more complex and nuanced beliefs. This, the guiding premise behind the process movement, requires, to varying degrees, the belief that changing a view of the world requires "conceptual change." The best beliefs will represent the world most accurately, and the beliefs are the result of a teachable (and learnable) process that help students develop clearer thinking.

From the perspective of interactionism, which is inherently pragmatist, beliefs organize pragmatically and historically with respect to other beliefs. What we believe

about the President's speech relates to a person's belief about Republicans and Democrats, to her belief about politics in general, and perhaps to her belief about her grandfather, the politician. This "nonsystematic" understanding of how beliefs organize is "extremely important" in developing pedagogical practices based on discursive interactionism (Yarbrough, *Inventive* 116) because, as Kent notes, it explains why "no process or system" can explain and thereby change a person's unique organization of beliefs (69). Moreover, since beliefs signify a person's unique interactions in the world, we can assume that where beliefs differ so do the causes influencing a person's beliefs.

I am now able to introduce a new critical vocabulary that names an interactionist conception of belief, which helps to provide clarity for the ongoing project of developing pedagogical practices that employ the beliefs of interactionist. I employ the term *commitments* to name the beliefs or *topoi* interlocutors bring with them to the discursive situation. I find this term invaluable in helping student writers understand why their ideas differ from others, and why it is often challenging (and some might say painful) when our beliefs change.

First, by referring to our ideas about the world and its objects as *commitments*, instead of beliefs, students understand that what we believe is dynamic and contingent. Most of us are committed to acting in a particular fashion when confronted with a familiar situation; however, when the conditions change our commitments, if we want to solve the problem at hand we need to adapt to present conditions. From this perspective the inadequacies of the five-paragraph essay to meet the demands of college writing is not a developmental problem – this form has adequately addressed the pragmatic and

historical discursive needs of the student – instead, these inadequacies signal the pragmatic limitations of this particular discursive practices to address the historical and environmental conditions at hand. Simply put, the interactionist is not concerned with whether a belief is *right* or *wrong* in some moralizing philosophical sense; instead, an interactionist is concerned with whether or not our *commitments* solve the discursive exigencies at hand.

Secondly, the term *commitments* helps to highlight the fully interactionist nature of our beliefs, and thereby the difficulty often felt in trying to solve discursive problems. Our commitments are in relation to other commitments. Adapting a commitment in response to the conditions of a particular discursive situation *can* also bring to the forefront the inadequacies of other commitments. My commitment to orphan advocacy is often challenged by my commitments to postcolonial theory, and my *believing* of postcolonial theorists often challenges my commitment to a causal understanding of discourse, and on and on. It is difficult (if not impossible) to determine what commitments will be affected as we encounter unfamiliar stimuli. Therefore, if one of rhetoric and composition's goals, as Jennifer Enoch suggests, is to encourage the "critical investigation" of our discursive beliefs, then it seems an interactionist description of how these types of inquires proceed might offer the field a new way forward with regards to questions of belief and meaning.

Drawing upon an experience with a student writer, I use the next section of the essay to explore how an interactionist view of discourse would describe the familiar experience of students struggling to critically inquire, especially when those inquires

challenge important commitments. If the goal of discourse studies involves helping others to understand the objects of our particular concerns then we need to prepare for the *crisis of commitments* that arise during discursive interaction. This phrase, *crisis of commitments*, names the embodied, emotional response of interlocutors recognizing the limitations of their commitments to ease the doubt created by particular discursive exigencies. In these moments of crisis, interlocutors must locate ways to proceed, ways to interact with the other in the hopes of finding solution to common discursive problems. The discursive decisions interlocutors choose to make, however, are complicated by the uncertainty of *passing theories* and triangulation.

The Crisis of Commitments

Of particular interest for my project are the ways in which reconfiguring our discipline in light of *discourse studies* would alter our understanding of guiding theories like rhetorical identification. Identification, I argued, functions as rhetoric and composition's method for exploring the implications of "encountering the other." In order to reconsider rhetorical identification in light of discursive interactionism I suggested that we might benefit from a pragmatic and interactionist view of belief—of what it means to make *meaning*. Beliefs, according to my pragmatist version of interactionism, are best understood as activities, *believings* that develop and exist during interlocution. *Commitments*, I argued, provides just this type of description because it views beliefs as contingent, mutable, temporally bound, and existing, at least in any verifiable fashion,

during interlocution. The next step then, before I am able to argue for the efficacy of *pragmatic empathy* as an interactionist description of identification, is to demonstrate how, when our beliefs are understood as commitments, discursive conflict provides, if we choose, the impetus for discourse because, as Yarbrough writes, “The best motivation for discourse...is inquiry about the cause of the differences we perceive” (*After* 9).

To illustrate how interlocutors’ differing perceptions of objects provide the impetus for discursive triangulation, I will conclude this chapter with an analysis of a simple narrative: the story of a writing teacher, myself, reconsidering my original view that conceptual inconsistencies in a student’s paper signaled cognitive disassociation in the student’s thinking. I did not believe what the student wrote because I did not believe her discursive choices accurately represented the situation she attempted to describe through her prose. In other words, I approached my student and her work as a committed social constructionist, and I viewed the inconsistencies of her text as “errors,” problems of interpretation – she could not identify the cultural-linguistic structures shaping her thinking about the problems she attempted to explore in her writing. Those moments in the student’s text that I identified as contradictory I perceived as hermeneutical problems. I assumed that my student did not have an accurate understanding of the “discourse communities” shaping her beliefs and attitudes, or of the beliefs and attitudes of those about whom she was writing. Perhaps most troubling, however, at least upon reflection, this narrative demonstrates my hubris as a teacher. When I encountered a difficult portion of text, I assumed that these difficulties stemmed from the student’s inability to write clearly. I assumed that she was unable to accurately represent the world through

language. These difficulties could have been attributed to a number of reasons, but, ultimately, regardless of the reason I chose to use, I intended my response to maintain my constructionist view that ineffective writing illustrates the student's need to obtain "new discourses" that would help her develop as a capable academic writer. I no longer believe that this constructionist view makes meaningful sense. However, at the time of this encounter, I saw writing, communication of any sort for that matter, as representational; therefore, misunderstandings between interlocutors, like the one I am about to describe, had to have been the effect of inaccurate language use. I offer this narrative as a way of suggesting that our reliance on social constructionism inevitably leads to our continued suspicion of other's discourse, especially during those moments of confusion and misunderstanding. This suspicion arises because our constructionist commitments tell us that our interlocutors' world(view)s are incommensurable with ours as a result of idiosyncratic conceptual schemes. Constructionist thinking, then, forces upon us the following contradiction: the inability to understand the other's discourse, and thereby world(view), is a problem that can only be solved if we believe that somehow we can find answers out of our world. Interactionist thinking, however, offers a much different description of misunderstanding –*the crisis of commitments*.

I invoke the term "crisis" not (solely) for the purposes of provocation; rather, the term "crisis" helps ground this discussion of commitments in rhetorical theory. "Crisis" derives from the Greek word *krisis*, which shares affinity with *kairos*, the classical rhetoric term referring to the proper "timing" on the part of a rhetor (Sipiora and Baumlin 1). It is not difficult to see the relationship between Webster's definition of

crisis – “an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending” – and Isocrate’s understanding of the effect of *kairos* – “a reliable correlation between rhetorical strategies and desired affects cannot be prescribed because the situational factor is paramount” (Cahn 133). Like the interactionists, ancient rhetoricians understood that environmental conditions would undoubtedly change how a speaker employed *topoi* to convey their message to the audience. In fact, Philip Sipiora sounds like an interactionist when he concludes, “it is precisely because a rhetor cannot anticipate every important situational circumstance that he or she *must* carry a flexible attitude into any given rhetorical situation” (9). Or, as I would say, an interlocutor’s *commitments*, because of their adaptive character, are capable of changing in response to the exigencies created by the specific conditions of a discursive situation.

From the perspective of discursive interactionism, every communicative situation is *kairotic* – interlocutors never know precisely how *passing theories* will develop in response to the other and the objects of their discourse. In one sense, *triangulation* defines the nature of a discursive *crisis* – interlocutors, if they want to share meaning, must respond to the “impending” conditions at hand. For the interactionist, discourse brings into relief “the only kind of crisis there is, of what *now* shall we do” (Yarbrough, *Deliberate Criticism* 16). Sometimes, these *kairotic* moments pass without much ado. For example, the discursive event of ordering coffee at Starbucks is relatively stable. The barista at the register asks what the customer would like, and the customer, familiar with such practices, responds with “I would like a Grande Mocha Frappuccino.” With relative ease the two parties triangulate upon the object of their discourse—the coffee drink—share

meaning, and complete specific actions based on the implications of the situations intersubjective meaning—the transactional exchange of money for coffee. It is clear in this example that often the commitments we maintain prior to interaction may not be that different from the passing theories we actually use to direct the other's attention.

However, place that same customer in another coffee shop (a different environmental context) and his response “Grande Mocha Frappuccino” will create a discursive crisis. That is to say, the barista at a non-Starbucks coffee shop does not serve “Grande” drinks nor do they serve the patented “Frappuccino” frozen beverage. The customer and the non-Starbucks barista cannot share the object of discourse, at least initially, and thus “discursive change,” the type of change necessitated by a discursive crisis, is required for understanding to take place. In other words, when interlocutor's initiate discourse, they draw upon their repertoire of prior theories, their commitments about the world, in order to shape the objects of discourse. When interlocutor's commitments draw upon similar socially informed experiences, they are capable of inventing the objects of discourse quickly, as seen in the Starbucks example. However, when interlocutor's share little in the way of experience, or, in the case of teachers and students, hold differing prior commitments about the conception of texts – the intended objects of discourse – triangulation that leads to shared meaning can be a difficult and daunting, if not impossible task. As the following example will demonstrate, often, intersubjective meaning, that is, understanding, never emerges through discourse. The crisis of commitments, in other words, remains and interlocutors halt interaction without

sharing meaning because they could not collaborate and recognize the triangulated relationships informing their responses to each other and the objects of their discourse.

A Crisis Observed

When Kim's conference time arrived, we sat in the worn blue chairs of my office, and I asked her about the progress of her current project, an essay connecting one of the readings from class conceptually to an event in her own life. I informed her that I believe the essay lacked coherence, and that she seemed unable to manage the contradictions appearing in her prose. The difficulties students face trying to negotiate complex ideas with the commitments they maintain from their adolescence are common in first-year writing; however, when I think back to that conference with Kim, I realize that at the time I cleverly believed that the disconnections other teachers would have identified as writing and thinking *problems* were, in fact, indicators of a *successful* middle-class education. I predicated this belief upon the constructionist view that learning is intended to help members of particular communities internalize those cultural-linguistic conventions. My commitment to social constructionism allowed me to view the inconsistencies within Kim's text as illustrative moments of conflicting ideologies, moments that illuminated the tensions between incommensurable discourse communities. Kim's membership in multiple discourse communities were coming into conflict, and this conflict brought to the forefront her intertextual subjectivity, which registered, on paper, as cognitive dissonance.

In her essay, Kim took bell hooks to task for the ideas she forwarded in her piece “Columbus: Gone but Not Forgotten.” Kim writes that she found hooks’ attitude toward “all white people” offensive. For Kim, hooks’ generalizations about people negated the possibilities of individuals being viewed “equal in his or her own way.” Kim understands the continued existence of racism, evidenced through her description of the police officer that pulled her over in high school because she had four African-American male friends in the car with her. Kim complicates this personal encounter with racism in the next paragraph, which explains how some racist people, her grandmother for example, were raised in a “different era” when some people, “never grew up to ‘like’ African-American people.” Her grandmother’s upbringing conflicted with Kim’s choice of friends, a contention resulting in quarrels between Kim and her grandmother: “[she] told me that I should not hang out with *them*.” Kim’s complicated relationship with her grandmother frames the rest of the essay, which tries to articulate how white people reared in racist environments should not be held as representative examples of “all white people.” Kim believes racists like “Christopher Columbus” and “the slaveholders” no longer exist, and those few racist individuals still prone to bigotry hold no moral sway in our current cultural moment. Therefore, “whites” should not be held accountable for their “forefathers” actions, for “just because a person is white does not mean that they have power.” Kim’s argument relied upon her tenacious beliefs, the ready-made conclusions, or commitments she developed before coming into the classroom. Kim attempted to both describe herself as a non-racist individual in opposition to her culture’s racist tendencies, while defending her grandmother’s racist actions, which Kim claims are the result of

larger cultural influences beyond her grandmother's control. Kim understood there to be an appropriate elaboration—commitments—for each position—commonplace understandings used daily within our culture to both excuse the actions of loved ones, and maintain an idealized sense of self. However, when brought together, as these ideas were in her essay, Kim noticed the contradictory nature of these competing conceptual schemes. Kim quite simply had no conceptual way to make sense of this experience. When these ideas appeared side-by-side on the page Kim began to feel the crisis of her commitments and these feelings registered the inadequacy of her habitual discursive practices to answer the exigencies of the current discursive situation. From the perspective of interactionism, to know anything is to share meaning with another. Therefore, the crisis of commitments often initiates as personal discomfort, but it is through discourse with an interlocutor that the severity of these crises are often clarified as they struggle to share objects of discourse.

Of course, neither Kim nor myself were committed interactionist at that moment, and therefore, I viewed her contradictory positions concerning race in her work resulted from a lack of critical perspective. At the time, I believed that “language” functioned as a medium through which experience was rendered; therefore, contradictory or unclear passages in students’ texts signaled an inaccurate representation of experience. In other words, I read student text with a distrustful eye—student mistakes were evidence of a writer’s inability to say what she meant, so how could I assume that she actually knew what she really wanted to say? Thus, I believed effective student-teacher conferences involved the instructor pointing out the incongruence of a writer’s assumption so that she

could write prose that demonstrates a more refined and mature view of the world – a view that demonstrates access to more critical and complex conceptual schemes. In short, my view of writing instruction—heavily influenced by the social constructionist like Berlin, Fish, and Russell, as well as those authors dealing with critical pedagogies, like Bizzell, Jarratt, hooks, and Lee—assumed that dealing with complex social issues involved students gaining membership in multiple discourse communities.

As a result of my thinking, I suggested Kim try to see the situation from the perspective of her grandmother, and to try to understand why she does not hold the same beliefs as Kim. I wanted Kim to “translate her grandmother’s language into her own idiom.” Kim readily admits her grandmother’s disapproval instigated conflict throughout high school, but when confronted with the possibility that her grandmother may be morally unjust – if held accountable to the moral code established by Kim – Kim’s commitment to the “golden rule” is abandoned in an attempt to explain the seemingly contradictory nature of her grandmother’s racism. What began as an essay espousing the importance of *recognizing* the individual becomes an argument *against* judging the individual. What I hoped Kim would recognize through this query was the “competing cultural logics” (Ratcliffe), or “activity systems”(Russell), or “discourse communities” (Bruffee), involved in shaping the competing narratives she and her grandmother held with regards to race. In an attempt to complicate her thinking through imagining another’s perspective, we both arrived at a moment of discursive crisis. I hoped she would recognize that no longer were her “ready-made conclusions” about the world able to withstand a dialogic encounter with alternative ideas and perspectives (Qualley, *Turns*

of Thought 35). I continued making reference to her essay, pointing out places where ideas conflicted and contradicted, moments within the text where I believed, as Susan Jarratt suggests, that the “multiple versions” of self that people maintain in order to deal experiences of “conjunction and disjunction, of association and substitution” were coming into focus for Kim (128). Influenced by the politics of critical pedagogy, I imagined that my role as “teacher” involved using dialogic encounters in order to raise the student’s awareness about competing discourses within their text. Eventually, however, my questions became too much, and Kim nailed her eyes to the green carpet of my office, and cried . . . and cried.

In the moment, I imagined that Kim’s tears signaled the cognitive dissonance our profession seems inclined to speak about with regard to students. I assumed that Kim was overwhelmed with the competing logics of her text. I assumed Kim was experiencing what Eve Wiederhold calls “representational fatigue.” Wiederhold defines representational fatigue as the embodied state that combines agitation with weariness” a state of emotion that “emerges from feeling muddled about what to say and how to deliver one’s opinion” (126). Representational fatigue, Wiederhold continues, “hovers around... the ‘quiet elision’ – that space in which the aim to represent simultaneously omits component parts within any representational scene” (127). From Wiederhold’s perspective, Kim could not represent herself simultaneously as both the loving granddaughter of a seemingly racist grandmother *and* the supportive, non-racist partner of an African-American male. This “quiet elision” when brought to Kim’s attention

resulted in an embodied emotional response, her tears, and as such, created a rhetorical moment where we could “pause and notice differently” (144).

As Wiederhold points out significant work has been done by rhetoricians like Lynn Worsham, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Cheryl Glenn, and Kristie Fleckenstein, to provide “more complex visions of the relationship between language, embodiment and judgment”; however, these theorists continue to maintain in their work the ontological distinction between words and things, and therefore to them language use remains, as Weiderhold’s comments demonstrate, an act of representation. Conversely, those quite elisions, which are often painful and embodied through our emotions, only point to the failure of language to represent the interiority of an agent attempting to engage the complexities of multiple discourses. So, while a student’s emotional response often elicits embodied responses on the part of the teacher, these shared expressive displays bring us no closer to understanding why we cannot deal with complexity and contradiction in our rhetorical acts. As discussed in Chapter One, affective responses *can* signal to us, if we choose to believe the interactionists, that our current habitual discursive actions are incapable of answering the questions at hand and initiate the process of triangulation. Of course, given that most of rhetoric and composition scholarship continues to derive its orientation to discourse from poststructuralism and social constructionist thinking, misunderstandings continue to be thought of as cultural-linguistic schemes—idiosyncratic and incommensurable world(view)s—coming into conflict. That is, misunderstandings are the *lies the other tells about my world*. Moreover, there is no hermeneutic that leads us out of this trap. Instead, as Davidson suggests, before

interlocutors enter into discursive triangulation, they must first apply the principle of charity to the other's discourse.

"The principle of charity," Davidson explains, is essential for triangulation to be effective. At its core discursive interactionist theory is pragmatic because it assumes that beliefs matter. Therefore, discursive triangulation proceeds only when interlocutors *believe* they can in fact share meaning with others. To do this, Davidson concludes, requires that interlocutors maintain two commitments to discourse. First, "if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters" (*Essential* 207). By this Davidson means that in order to maintain a commitment to intersubjective meaning interlocutors must maintain a commitment to the notion that when "interpreting others [interlocutors have] got to make their thoughts hold together to a certain extent," which is to say, "you can't understand people if you don't see them as logical in the way that you are" (Kent, "Language Philosophy" 7). And, as Davidson's externalism and my interactionism make clear, the logic that holds our thoughts together are related to the environmental conditions that shape our relationships to objects and others in the world. Therefore, since interlocutors are often made aware that they do not use marks, noises, and gestures in the same way, there must some other means by which interlocutors can find an initial point of agreement, some starting point for discourse where they share enough in common to believe that communication will lead to a fuller understanding.

The starting point, and second precondition for discourse is that interlocutors maintain a commitment to a shared world. This commitment is rather simple: if environmental factors shape my beliefs—the causal relationships I recognize between

objects in the world—then I must assume those same rules govern others’ beliefs. Or, as Davidson states, “you can’t understand people if you don’t seem as sharing a world with you” (Kent “Language Philosophy,” 7). Pedagogically, then, the principle of charity provides a means for interpreting the other’s (student’s) discourse. As Kevin J. Porter writes, “Without charity, we cannot link what the speaker says, what the speaker does, and the world.” In other words, “if we assume uncharitably that the speaker is nonrational (i.e., not acting for any reasons), then we could not even guess at the meaning of an utterance because ‘any interpretation would be *equally* likely’ or unlikely” (“Pedagogy” 586). It is important to point out that the principle of charity does not justify commitments; rather it assumes that the other’s beliefs are generally true to the extent that the other responds to the same, shared world as the self.

As discussed earlier, our commitments are bound to particular historical conditions. Moreover, people tend to change beliefs as little as possible. If our habitual use of marks, noises and gestures allow us to get around in the world without pause or conflict, then we tend to maintain these commitments. These characteristics also explain why certain groups of people communicate more effectively—they tend to employ similar discursive habits in their interactions with objects of discourse. There is no reason to appeal to notions like conceptual schemes like, language, or culture, to make this argument; rather, it is enough to say that frequent, consistent, and sustained interaction with the same people will result in similar responses toward objects of discourse. When interlocutors discourse with those with whom they are unfamiliar, the ease with which

they are able to direct the other's attention toward objects of discourse is often a frustrating challenge, as was the case with Kim and me.

Looking back on this experience, I realize that I did not discourse with Kim through the principle of charity. My constructionist commitments did not allow for the view of discourse interactionism provides. What I saw as inconsistencies in her thinking may have been inconsistencies, but in order to claim that I could locate error in her prose I first needed to demonstrate that I could locate consistency, and in order to accomplish that task I needed to assume that we shared the same world and that world shaped our causal relationships and thereby thinking. If I had approached our discursive encounter with charity then I would have realized that Kim's visceral, affective expressions signaled the crisis of her commitments. The crisis of commitments brings to the surface the limits of our habitual responses—the rules we imagine to govern our responses to situations—and in order to proceed toward understanding, interlocutors must be willing, as Yarbrough describes, “to go beyond the rules” (*Inventive* 136). Moving beyond the rules, Yarbrough contends, means entering into the “ethical phase of discourse”; however, as Yarbrough effectively argues, *ethos* functions much differently for an interactionist than for rhetoricians who employ the classical definition of the term, “character of the speaker.” This is not to say that an interactionist description avoids questions of character; *ethos* does correspond to the qualities of the speaker, but from this perspective “character” is an interactional process with objects. “*Ethos* is best thought of interactionally,” Yarbrough writes, “as the set of social relations we project upon a situation that determines how we interact with things” (*Inventive* 170). Commitments *are*

therefore part of an interlocutor's ethos, which is to say, an interlocutor approaches a discursive situation with the particular commitments they intend to project upon the situation. While limited, our prior discursive experiences—commitments—are all we have to go on, and, thereby, for triangulation to occur interlocutors must assume the other is *ethical in their discourse*. That is, the other's commitments are shaped by experiences in the same, shared world.

And while our commitments are real—they influence our actions in the material world—they *are always changing*. While Yarbrough does not use the term commitments, he is getting at the same idea when he explains how we develop our discursive ethos. He writes, “rather than a fixed essence or a continually changing network of beliefs, *ethos* is more like the role or roles we play in a socially determined situation, sometimes according to the script but usually improvisationally,” which means, while we often do not because of discomfort or cost (both material and social capital), “*we* can assume different roles” (170). That is, because our commitments are fluid, temporally bound, and determined in the interactions with others and objects, we can commit to new triangulated relationships with others and objects in the world.

And, as a teacher, this interactionist description of belief gives me hope that we can make the most of encounters with students like Kim. In order to do so, however, we must be willing to extend charity. Furthermore, as teachers we must be willing to believe that the world that conditions our discursive responses is the same world conditioning our students' responses. Quite simply, with regards to Kim, I did not allow Kim her full-weight because I never allowed her responses to condition my commitments—the

interactionist way of saying, “I did not believe her.” I want to suggest that instead of continuing to view the other’s discourse with suspicion we see moments of misunderstanding as moment of crisis; and since these crises occur in the world we share with others it behooves us to work collaboratively toward amelioration. Changing our beliefs about *believing* allows us the freedom to view change as possible, to say that *ethical development is possible* and that we can change how we commit to respond to others and objects. When we abandon beliefs and embrace *believings*, we are one step closer to sharing meaning with those with whom we share a world.

NOTES

1. Investigating the problems of rhetoric and composition's commitment to hermeneutics rather than the materiality of texts is the focus of Raúl Sánchez's monograph *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies*.

2. Ecocomposition continues to challenge the notion of "place" as a central tenet of discourse. For an excellent introduction to these ideas see "Breaking Ground in Ecocomposition: Exploring Relationships between Discourse and Environment" by Sidney I. Dobrin and Christian R. Weisser.

3. Kenneth Bruffee's and Stanley Fish's work, perhaps more so than others, focuses on the conventions that arise as discourse communities develop complexity and tradition.

4. It is important to note that from the perspective of interactionism, resistance names the challenge interlocutor's face as they attempt direct the attention of each other toward shared objects. Regardless of intent, interlocutors are wrapped up in the process of resistance when they interact with the world differently from their partner. In other words, from an interactionist perspective, we can resist the other's discursive commitment to objects *and choose* not to allow the other's discourse to affect us.

5. Kent uses Joseph Harris's essay "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing" to define the "thin formulation" of social construction. For Harris, all discourse is socially constructed but not over determined. That is, "one is always simultaneously a part of several discourses, several communities, is always already committed to a number of conflicting beliefs and practices"(19). From my perspective, Harris's definition represents the contemporary view of community.

6. Davidson's critique of Kuhn stems from Kuhn's argument that scientist operating in different traditions "work in different worlds" (Kuhn 134). Therefore, to understand change requires that scientists radically change their conceptual schemes, and thereby see a new world. Such a notion, Davidson argues, is self-refuting because if true scientists would never be able to make these conceptual changes because they would not know the customs, conventions, and grammars of this new place. This contradiction leads to Davidson's quip, "Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using – what else? – our post-revolutionary idiom" (*Essential* 197).

CHAPTER IV

(AN)OTHER WAY

Stanley Fish is probably right. Rhetoric and composition studies cannot change the world, especially if the world is as social constructionists like Fish describe it. So while Fish's "wholesale condemnation" of rhetoric and composition studies in his new book *Save the World on Your Own Time*, is intended to shed light on the problem of over-politicized writing classrooms, I cannot help but think that the problems he is referencing are simply the natural outcome of three decades of believing that all discourse is socially constructed (Bizzell "Composition" 175). Therefore, when Fish writes that "Students who take so-called courses in writing" that emphasize marshalling arguments around current issues "...certainly [will] not be learning anything about how language works; and without a knowledge of how language works they will be unable either to spot the formal breakdown of someone's else's language or to prevent the formal breakdown of their own," I am inclined to agree with him (41). However, my agreement is ironic and stems from my belief that it would be impossible for students to locate "breakdowns" in discourse with the other when they rely on concepts like "interpretive communities," which can't tell us anything "about how language works." Fish says that to identify "breakdowns," the discursive conflicts resulting from misunderstandings between interlocutors, requires that speakers share access to the same "interpretive community." So while Fish may cleverly argue that within the classroom setting speakers can

“objectively” share the same contingent and mutable conceptual schemes as a result of being in the same interpretive community (the classroom) (“Save the World” 138-139) he cannot, at least in the world he imagines, describe this process without raising the question, “if all discourse is relative to a particular community/culture/language/etc., how can we ever claim to know the minds of others, ‘someone else’s language,’ if their discourse derives from beyond the scope of our particular ‘interpretive community?’”

As Thomas Kent points out, the above question illustrates the problem of trying to understand how we “communicate across difference” when discourse is believed to be socially constructed. Kent clearly articulates what is at stake when he writes, “If all we have to authorize our beliefs is the internal coherence strategies of our own communities, we possess little hope of understanding the outsider, and the outsider possesses even less hope of acquiring the moral status enjoyed by outsiders” (“Ethnocentrism” 95). The reason for this dilemma, Kent believes, comes from the social constructionist belief that “knowing the world means knowing a particular conceptual scheme, and knowledge is something we acquire by learning and internalizing the normative conventions that constitute our conceptual schemes” (“On the Very Idea” 428). Therefore, the social constructionists cannot avoid the contradiction at the heart of their position. Stanley Fish draws attention to this contradiction when he writes, “communication occurs within situations and...to be in a situation is already to be in possession of (or to be possessed by) a structure of assumptions, of practices understood to be relevant in relation to purposes and goals that are in already in place” (318). That is to say, from the view of the social constructionist, language is both determined by and the creation of a specific

interpretive community's shared conceptual scheme. If all that speakers know is derived from the language created by the conceptual schemes with which they identify, how can interlocutors share meanings with others without re-configuring the others' discourse into versions of their own? In attempting to translate the other's "language" into the "language" of the self, *via* rhetorical acts like *identification*, speakers engage in a form of ethnocentrism, "the tendency to judge others according to the conceptual scheme held by one's own culture" (Kent "Ethnocentrism" 92). Given the discursive exigencies resulting from globalization and the increased diversity in both our classrooms and our communities, locating ways to "communicate across difference" while avoiding ethnocentric discursive practices seems ever more important. However, I do not believe the capacity to describe these communicative practices is found in the thinking of social constructionists like Fish; rather, it seems time to redefine what it means to share meaning with the other, which requires a move away from *identification*, a central tenet of the rhetorical tradition that aligns itself with the work of social constructionists and the theoretical position most frequently invoked when discussing the rhetorical problems of communication across difference.

Kenneth Burke makes clear that *rhetorical identifications* are social constructions when he describes them in the following way: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk in his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (*Rhetoric of Motives* 55). Burke's theory of *identification*, which functions as "an accessory" to "persuasion" (the term traditionally emphasized by rhetorical study), names the mechanism through which speakers both recognize and are

recognized as members of a particular discourse community. Identification is central to social constructionist thought because it provides a theoretical model describing how individuals make linguistic connections for mutual benefit. Or, as Burke reminds, identification “is hardly other than a name for the function of sociality” (*Attitudes* 267). “I speak to another,” in the social constructionist paradigm, simply names what Burke called the “invitation to rhetoric” – the interaction of speakers as they attempt to learn each other’s conceptual frameworks (language/culture/conventions) in order to understand for mutual social benefit. However, as Reed Way Dasenbrock points out, social constructionists like Burke and Fish “cannot know whether we are seeing something different unless we can understand each other’s perspective” (25). That is to say, I cannot locate “breakdowns” unless I can claim to know the other’s intention for speaking, and if knowledge of intention is possible then I must have at least some idea of the objects the other is directing my attention toward. And, if I can understand another’s intentions, then “the radical otherness” supposed by thinkers like Fish cannot be keeping speakers from sharing meaning; rather, discursive conflict – the crisis of commitments – if we allow it, signals the potential for generative discourse, a moment where speakers, if they choose, can enter into discursive triangulation, which results in intersubjective meaning.

To know that we share the world with others and, thereby, the objects that affect our discourse, are the key characteristics to Donald Davidson’s notion of *radical interpretation*, which, as Stephen R. Yarbrough argues, is a “fully interactionist” account of how communication occurs (“Modes” 494). For *discursive interactionists*, “language

does not operate by one set of laws while things operate by another”; rather, discourse involves our interactions with environments, “and environment *includes* things and people and the marks and noises they make to affect one another” (*Inventive* 14). Sharing meaning, then, involves exactly the same kinds of environmentally conditioned interactions that take place all the time. As Yarbrough notes, to share meaning is to share the conditions that influence another’s discourse: “If we want to understand” other people then “we want to know what caused them to speak as they did” (*After* 6). In other words, “We begin to communicate with others once the causes that condition our speech begin to coincide with the causes that condition theirs” (7). Whereas the social constructionist views identification as the sharing of meaning through the process of translating the other’s cultural-linguistic schemes Davidson, Kent, and Yarbrough, understand shared meaning as a implicit to discursive intercourse, naming those moments when interlocutors respond to the same objects of common concern. From the position of discursive interactionism, intersubjective meaning does not require translating or learning the language of the other; the sharing of meaning, names the experience of communication—an interlocutor recognizing the conditions that influence the other’s discourse and allowing those conditions to influence her responses, thereby becoming like (an)other with regards to the same object of common cause.

The goal for this chapter, then, is to articulate how intersubjective meaning as interactionism’s methodological imperative avoids both the problems of conceptual relativism and ethnocentrism. The sharing of meaning across differences, I argue, is accomplished via *pragmatic empathy*, which names the orientation of speakers that view

their communicative acts as contingent, mutable, temporally bound, and dependent upon the collaborative, that is coordinated, interaction of at least one other who can respond as (an)other. I employ the term “(an)other” as a critical challenge to poststructuralism’s “*other*.” While the term “other” implies incommensurability, “(an)other” is meant to imply an interlocutor with whom we can share the conditions through which the relationships between objects and interlocutors emerge in a given discursive interaction.

In order to articulate this interactionist methodology, I illustrate how the traditional notion of rhetorical identification, which serves as the methodological imperative for constructionist rhetorical thought, cannot avoid charges of ethnocentrism and relativism and is thereby vulnerable to Davidson’s critique of conceptual schemes. In order to avoid the inherent contradictions of conceptual relativism, I will turn to Davidson’s notion of *triangulation* and demonstrate how *pragmatic empathy* is a function of *passing theories*, the critical term Davidson uses to signify “where...agreement is greatest” (*Essential* 261) between interlocutors and the marks, noises, gestures they use to direct the other’s attention to the causal relationships shaping their orientation to the object of common cause. Along the way I will seek help from a number of pragmatists, who, while varied in their particular articulations of pragmatism, are nonetheless committed to understanding meaning as deriving from specific environmental conditions, verified only in the intersubjectivity of collaboration. Ultimately, I hope to provide rhetoric and composition studies with a methodology for engaging difference without losing touch with our world or each other. In the end, I agree with Fish that we must locate the means by which to

understand each other's discursive breakdowns – I just happen to believe there is (an)other way.

Identification and Conceptual Relativism, or, Unfortunate Ethnocentrism and the Sharing of Meaning

As mentioned previously, Elaine Scarry tells us that what we believe about others will determine how we will interact with them. At least since Burke, rhetoricians have imagined “others” as belonging to particular discourse communities that shape speakers’ experiences in the world by determining the symbolic choices available for describing those experiences. Social constructionism employs what James Berlin calls “socio-epistemic rhetoric” to describe how discourse functions. This “dense formulation,” Berlin writes, assumes that signifying practices determine “subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions” (77). In other words, “There can be no identity without identification, and there can be no identification without figuration” (Davis, “Burke and Freud” 127). From the perspective of social constructionist like Burke and Fish, the symbolic figures used to construct our identities and our worlds derive from particular discourse communities.

Yarbrough points out that terms like “community,” when employed to describe discourse production, typically mean something like the “sharing of beliefs, conventions, linguistic habits and values” in order to communicate with others (*After* 6). Whether described in terms of Bruffee’s discourse community, Fish’s notion of interpretive communities, or, simply, as the “ubiquity of language,” the term used by Richard Rorty

to describe language's function as a medium through which we reconcile our experiences in the world, the prevailing sentiment within rhetoric and composition studies remains that a person's discourse derives from a particular social location (also see: David Bleich, Sharon Crowley, Sidney Dobrin, Susan Jarratt, and Krista Ratcliffe) . Perhaps Fish summarizes this thinking best when he supposes that speakers create meaning "not on our own," but "in a publicly available system of intelligibility" ("How to Recognize" 1028). These publics, then, "are formed by individuals, with different orientations and identities but with enough in common to recognize one another as members of a polity or community" (Bernard-Donals, "Against" 32). Therefore, "our knowledge of others and of the world" will always be "relative to the community in which we live" (Kent, "On the Very Idea" 426).

As Anis Bawarshi, Reed Way Dasenbrock, Thomas Kent, and Stephen Yarbrough have pointed out, discourse communities are similar to what Donald Davidson calls a "conceptual scheme." In his essay "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," Davidson confronts the "heady doctrine and exotic doctrine" of relativism – the belief that reality "is relative to a scheme," and "what counts as real in one system may not in another" (196). The prevailing assumption within the humanities, Davidson suggests, is that everyone speaks a "language," which is the production of a particular "conceptual scheme" (197). For the philosopher or rhetorician that believes all discourse derives from the social, conceptual schemes "are ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene" (196). Consequently, then,

“where conceptual schemes differ, so do languages” (197). The current emphasis in rhetoric and composition studies, therefore, focuses on the hermeneutical challenges associated with discourse, given that communicative acts arise from supposedly incommensurable conceptual schemes.

Rhetoric and composition studies, Raúl Sánchez argues, follows literary theory in this way. The prevailing epistemologies and pedagogies attempt to examine the underlying cultural, linguistic and socio-economic schemes shaping texts, which ultimately demonstrate the conditions of incommensurability between speakers of different discourse communities (4-5). It is not surprising, then, that an important focus of rhetorical study lies in the examination of “culture.” As discussed in Chapter One, culture is the ubiquitous term currently used to designate the “substance” through which all discourse is mediated. And as mediums, cultures are metaphysical entities worthy “of scientific study” because they possess “causal properties”; however, cultures are seldom studied as “historically developed analytical tools” (101). Thus, a social constructionist has no problem understanding Krista Ratcliffe’s search for “codes of cross-cultural conduct”; Theresa Kulbaga’s (“Pleasurable Pedagogies”) desire to identify the rhetorical function of empathy in discussions of transnational feminist discourse; David Bleich’s emphasis on disclosure for the purposes of identifying memberships; ecocompositionists, like Sidney Dobrin’s and Christian Weisser’s illustrations of the powerful role of place on culturally specific discourse practices; or the explanations of genre theorists, like Anis Bawarshi’s, Amy Devitt’s, and David Russell’s explanations of the relationship between discourse conventions and cultural practice. Each of these views make sense to the social

constructionist because each, as Raúl Sánchez points out, maintains a “hermeneutic disposition” toward discourse study (4). That is, each assumes that the study of discourse should focus on how language mediates our experiences in the world, and how languages (often referred to as specific literacies) derive from particular cultures. Rhetoric and composition assumes, along with Patricia Bizzell, that “foundational knowledge is really the product of cultural activity, shaped by ideology and constituted, not merely conveyed by rhetoric” (664). The prevailing assumption remains that we never experience unmediated touch with the material world; the cultural schemes that give meaning to our experiences shape our identities, and limit our abilities to create rhetorical identifications with others.

Understanding these relationships between identity, identification, discourse and culture represents, as Christian R. Weisser points out, “most of the research, scholarship and teaching of the past four decades,” which was “intended to enable students to better understand who they are and how language shapes their conceptions of themselves and the conceptions others have of them” (“Ecomposition” 81). He continues, “Specifically, our conceptions of how identity is formed have corresponded to our personal, social, and more recently our political theories of discourse” (81). In other words, the past four decades of rhetorical study have been defined by what John Trimbur calls the “social turn,” a “post-process, post-cognitivist theory and pedagogy that represents literacy as an ideological arena and composing as a cultural activity by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others' subjectivities, discourses, practices, and institutions” (109). Discursive competence, to

know the mind of the other via communication, “cannot be understood strictly on cognitive grounds; it means rather joining new communities and taking part in new conversations” (Trimbur, “Consensus” 443). Shared meaning develops through the translation of the other’s conceptual schemes, a complicated process in which speakers must account for the social, historical, political, cultural, and environmental conditions that shape the other’s discourse.

These acts of translation, however, are even more complicated given the current theoretical sentiment that each speaker is a wholly unique example of a particular cultural group. The above description of how culture (or any conceptual scheme) effects discourse assumes a relatively stable notion of discourse community, or as Bryon Hawk notes, an overly “deterministic notion of social construction” (222), which allows for a tidy description of how discourse communities shape peoples’ discursive practices. Similarly, Bizzell contends that discourse communities are “unstable,” and “fraught with contradiction”; moreover, “that instability is a sign of its health, its ability to adapt to changing historical conditions” (662-663). Bizzell’s remarks concerning the larger social nature of discourse communities echoes the sentiments shared by those theorists concerned with understanding how individuals both replicate and deviate from socially constructed narratives about the world.

The individual, from the perspective of the social constructionists like Bizzell, is unique, dynamic, nuanced, *and* inextricably connected to particular cultures. To be clear, while membership within a particular culture is taken as a given, no person is simply a replication of communal values and norms. The “radical particularity of the self,”

Bernard-Donals reminds other social constructionists, is never completely resolved within the construction of “we” (36). Currently, then, the emphasis of rhetorical studies addressing issues of “cross-cultural” identification is two-fold. First, these inquiries must address the impact of culture upon a speaker’s discourse practices; and secondly, cross-culture communication requires an understanding of how speakers deviate from a particular cultural narrative. As Krista Ratcliffe cautions, “a text or a person is associated with—but not necessarily representative of—an entire cultural group” (79). Therefore, to avoid the trap of essentializing difference (positing that the other *is* representative of a particular culture that can be studied scientifically), rhetoricians, as Susan Jarratt suggests, need to understand the ways speakers often engage in “self-multiplication,” a “metonymic process of subject construction,” in which speakers illustrate their associations with, but also differences from, cultural groups (111,114). As the writers above demonstrate, there are no neatly defined discourse communities, no self-evident cultures that provide foundational knowledge for speakers. Instead, discourse communities are dynamic, evolving, and mutable systems that interact with environmental, social, and political conditions to shape the conceptual schemes that mediate people’s experiences in the world. Or, as Burke notes, even “two students, sitting side by side” will “identify the subject differently” (27).

Timothy Crusius in his essay “Neither Trust or Suspicion,” illustrates the divided nature of Burke’s thinking, and ultimately the irony that is central to social constructionism in general. Crusius contends that for Burke “shared meaning is the basis of identification” (86). Burke’s claim only further complicates the problem of describing

how people communicate across difference. If what we know of the world results from a process mediated by conceptual schemes, and if these schemes are unique to each individual, such that they cannot be shared with any certainty, then how can speakers claim to make identifications with others? Diane Davis further complicates this problem with her reading of Burke. Davis, following Crusius, suggests, “identification is a function of (rather than the condition for) shared meaning” (129). In other words, identifications are the evidence of shared meaning even though interlocutors supposedly speak wholly different and unique languages. Thus, the difficulty for rhetoricians concerned with understanding how interlocutors create identifications across difference and share meaning lies in explaining how speakers, all of whom are supposed to have their own unique conceptual schemes, could ever conceive of sharing meaning with others. Davidson phrases the problem in the following way: “The problem of interpretation [the term Davidson uses to denote the sharing of meaning] is domestic as well as foreign: it surfaces for speakers of the same language in the form of the question, how can it be determined that the language is the same?” (184). Or, to reshape Davidson’s question for the purposes of this argument, how can interlocutors know if they have constructed identifications capable of sharing meaning when they are supposedly incommensurate with each other?

Burke, much like Ratcliffe and Jarratt, never addresses the question of how we know that *we know the mind of the other*. Instead, Burke famously writes, “put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to

rhetoric” (25). For Burke, like the social constructionists, people exist within the *always already* framework of culture. There is no determining a person’s pre-discursive identity because as Diane Davis writes, summarizing Burke’s views on sociality and identification, “There can be no identity without identification” (127), and identification always involves discourse. Burke makes this point clear when he states, “we are clearly in the region of rhetoric” when considering how a person’s cultural and linguistic practices mark them as “a participant in some social or economic class” (*Rhetoric* 28). In other words, Burke concludes, “‘Belonging’ in this sense is rhetorical” (*Rhetoric* 28). According to Burke, then, “there is no essential identity”; rather, every person is “the incalculable totality” of “complex and contradictory identifications” (Davis 127). Thus, like the social constructionists who borrow his notion of identification, Burke attempts to articulate a theory of how interlocutors share meaning – identification – while at the same time maintaining a belief in incommensurable conceptual schemes.

This contradiction at the heart of Burke’s theory of identification (and social constructionist thought in general) makes it impossible to explain how interlocutors know if they are in fact sharing meaning with the other. Burke’s notion of identification assumes that speakers come to share meaning, as Davidson might say, by translating “one idiom” into another (*Essential* 184). Such a project is, at best, impossible – we always already understand the world differently from others based on our unique adaptations of cultural experiences – and, at worst, ethnocentric. As Thomas Kent argues, when speakers believe that cultures “control what we believe, there will always be outsiders – ‘others’ – residing outside of our community whom we do not regard as our moral equal”

(“Ethnocentrism” 94). Often this inequality is demonstrated in what Kent calls the “exclusionary ethic” of social constructionism, in which the worth of the other’s utterance “is evaluated exclusively in an idiom inaccessible and even forbidden to the outsider” (“Ethnocentrism” 96). Consequently, we are often slow to identify with others because we evaluate their utterances based on our own sense of the situation. That is, we evaluate the other’s discursive acts by imagining how we would have spoke in the same situation, and if the other’s utterance does not align closely enough with this imaginary assessment we are less likely to share her meaning.

With little hope of providing descriptions of how rhetorical acts create shared meaning, thinkers like Michael Bernard-Donals and Raúl Sánchez encourage an abandonment of the project altogether. Sánchez in his monograph *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies* suggests that rhetoricians should focus on the “materiality” of texts, the “(f)act of writing,” in which scholars “theorize writing fully as cultural (re)production, that is, as the production of the conditions for representation” (71). In other words, Sánchez wants to focus on the recursive relationship between culture and cultural production. Bernard-Donals, in contrast, wants to abandon notions of culture, or “publics” altogether. Rather than focusing on how speakers use discourse to make rhetorical identifications and share meaning about the world, Bernard-Donals suggests that rhetoricians begin “doing away with notions of the public altogether” (31). Since it is impossible to determine how publics, whether understood as cultures, discourse communities, or any other conceptual scheme, provide “common locations” for speakers to share meaning via discourse, rhetoricians might be well served to understand

rhetical acts as “*beginning with the instability of the human subject*” (31). In his formulation, “otherness (difference) cannot be overcome through discourse but is made radically evident *through* discourse, and that because language is founded upon displacement,” which is to say, there are no identifications, cultures, or discourse communities to which discourse can make appeals – “there is no stable foundation for discourse” (39).

So while Burke and the social constructionist view discourse as a kind of “mediatory ground” that establishes, to a limited extent, identifications, Bernard-Donals argues against such grounds. Yet, although Bernard-Donals attempts to move beyond the influence of Burke and social constructionist thought, he cannot avoid the same contradiction, which Reed Way Dasenbrock clearly articulates: “we cannot know whether we are seeing something different unless we can understand each other’s perspective, translate each other’s language [or culture]; and if we can understand and translate each another’s perspective” then we are not confined to believing that our radical otherness will prevent us from sharing meaning (“Do We Write” 25). It would seem that the importance of sharing meaning with others *is knowing* when sharing between interlocutors occurs. Constructionist theories of discourse cannot articulate this type of knowing. Interactionism, however, offers a description of knowing that avoids contradiction, and thereby leads to an articulation of intersubjective meaning that allows interlocutors to know when they share meaning with the other. In order to understand interactionism’s description of shared meaning we must first articulate how *discursive*

interactionism differs from the prevailing sentiments of rhetoric and composition studies.

Bernard-Donals and Sánchez, most rhetoricians for that matter, take as given the notion that language is a medium through which we apperceive our experiences in the world. As noted earlier, conceptual schemes (whether understood as language or culture) create a “metaphysical gap” between nature and culture, where “things” – material objects – function under one set of physical laws while language functions under another set because language is assumed to be ontologically distinct from other objects and therefore interacts with the world differently. Jacques Derrida labeled these beliefs as “structuralist” and ushered in the current mode of discourse analysis, “*post-structuralism*,” by demonstrating the impossibility of conceptual schemes being able to determine “truth.” And since most theorists are unwilling to give up their belief in language’s capacity as a media, and the “concomitant belief that one set of laws applies to ‘things’ while another, completely different, set applies to ‘language’ and ‘culture,’ they divorce the determination of meaning from the determination of truth” (“Modes” 493). “Consequently,” Yarbrough continues, “no matter how individual, multiple, or site-and-history-bound they conclude the production of meaning to be, they still assume that ‘truth’ is necessarily determined *after* meaning, and so they further assume that truth is relative to meaning, or, rather, to the cultural-linguistic systems...that they believe do determine meanings” (492). What something means *never* objectively articulates the truth conditions that made a particular discursive event possible. Thus, in the same way, rhetorical identifications *never* objectively articulate the truth conditions that make shared

meaning possible; moreover, since the existence of conceptual schemes and their consequential effect on speakers is never questioned, examinations of rhetorical identifications simply question whether they actually perform their perceived task.

It is clear, then, that rhetorical identifications, as presently conceived, rely upon *unfortunate ethnocentrism*. Regardless of our good intentions, Burke's constructionist notion of identification offers no way to conceive of shared meaning other than as appeals to conceptual schemes, and in making such appeals speakers necessarily exclude the other because the process is wholly dependent upon the person's ability to apperceive situations subjectively. Most of us, however, want to value difference, and believe sharing meaning with the other provides a clear example of this value. Unfortunately our current postmodern and poststructuralist understandings of discourse do not provide coherent descriptions of how to accomplish these goals. Therefore, as Rey Chow points out, the "preferred benevolent gesture" of thinkers dealing with problems of communication across difference is to "displace and postpone" others "to a utopian unrealizable realm" that "cannot materialize *in the present*" (1917). In other words, since we can never claim to know the mind of the other, and therefore can never claim to share meaning, we abandon the project altogether and instead focus on how to delay and avoid the inevitable conflict that will ensue as people encounter others' alternative versions of the world.

However, it is possible both to describe how interlocutors come to share meaning and thereby create *discursive identifications* and to avoid the trap of ethnocentrism. To do so, however, requires us to abandon the belief in an ontological difference between words

and things, nature and culture, and instead view discourse as causal. That is, when speakers take an interactionist approach to communication, discourse functions like any other interaction, we respond to the environmental conditions that shape our responses to objects, which includes others. Therefore, to share meaning and create identifications are phases of the same process.

Passing Theories Through Pragmatic Empathy

Richard Coe in his essay “Defining Rhetoric – and Us” attempts to make clear the importance of Burke’s work on rhetoric and composition. As discussed earlier, Coe summarizes Burke’s work on rhetoric making abundantly clear the connections between Burke’s thinking and the tenets of social constructionism. For Burke, Coe suggests, human behavior *is* “symbolic action,” which is to say, “motive mediated by symbols, not mere motion” (41). From a Burkean perspective, Coe concludes, “everything we do is mediated by our symbols” (41). For Burke knowledge is “not the result of the confrontation of the individual mind with reality” but instead discursive acts that “organize the available means we have at any given time to talk about reality” (Trimbur, “Consensus” 443). In other words, our acts of discourse are never part of the world governed by causal principles like other objects. Instead, as Trimbur’s remark makes clear, discourse is assumed to be an ontologically distinct entity that interacts with the material world metaphysically. For the most part, rhetoric and composition studies operates from this perspective, assuming that “language is an entity, a systems of signs, the function of which is to mediate between mind and world,” and therefore the emphasis

of study remains centered on “whether language [or other conceptual schemes like culture] can successfully perform that function” (Yarbrough, *Inventive* 7).

In “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” Davidson continues building his theory of a causal definition of discourse – meaning is derived from the *interactions* of people with things, situations that are wholly unique and unlikely to be repeated. Therefore, “we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions” (*Essential* 265). Conventions, another name for conceptual schemes like “culture” and “language,” are assumed to be the means by which people *represent* their *interactions* with the world. Discourse, which supposedly derives from conventions, cannot, therefore, allow unmediated interaction with the material world. Or as Rorty suggests in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, we are “never encountering reality *except under a chosen description*” (xxxix).

The problems in believing that conceptual schemes always mediate between our minds and the world are numerous (see: Dasenbrock, Kent, Snead, Yarbrough), but of critical importance for this discussion are the ways in which conceptual relativism (and hopefully by now it is clear that Burke’s notion of identification and Fish’s social constructionism are versions of this relativism) never allows interlocutors to claim they know the mind of the other and thereby share meaning *in* the world. Instead, *knowing* is a delayed occurrence. Appeals to conceptual schemes make clear that human discourse can never accurately describe the world because discourse *never* occurs *in the world*. That is, discourse, from the perspective of structuralism and post-structuralism, is never bound by environmental conditions that influence other physical encounters. This position leads to

one of the prevailing assumptions guiding rhetorical study, “the idea that *any* language distorts reality, which implies that only wordlessly if at all that the mind comes to grips with things as they really are” (Davidson *Essential* 197).

Of course, the situation is further complicated if what we refer to as “identity” is derived from conceptual schemes. So, if all we have is “linguistic identity” (Chow 1911), we cannot claim to “stand outside our language or culture in order to judge the effectiveness of our language and culture,” and we are inextricably bound by the limits of discourse (Yarbrough *Inventive* 15). To create identifications with the other, then, represents a cynical acceptance of solipsism: I imagine the other as meaning what I would and nothing beyond my idiosyncrasies is intelligible. This is what C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards call the “Proper Meaning Superstition,” the belief that “the speaker is referring to what we should be referring to were we speaking the words ourselves” (qtd. in Yarbrough *Inventive* 20). Since “truth” occurs in the material world, and is therefore pre-linguistic, events are made to *mean something* through appeals to language or culture, which are unique to the individual. To create identifications and share meaning, from this perspective, means that interlocutors would have to share the same conceptual schemes, and to do this would require sharing the same experiences, which of course is impossible. As Thomas Kent notes, our current understandings of rhetoric and composition can only help speakers “modify” their “background knowledge,” but a social constructionist view of language “cannot teach [students] how to employ” discourse in the same way they interact with their environment (“Paralogic” 37). And since we cannot employ discourse to work in the material world, the idea of making identifications across difference is at

the very least a deferred task (see: Derrida, Homi K. Bhabha). The irony is even more pronounced when rhetoricians like Gary Olson claim that the future of rhetoric and composition studies lies in determining how our acts of discourse allow us to “interrogate how gender, race, ethnicity, and power relationships manifest themselves in discursive practices” and thereby leads “toward understanding the encounter with the Other” (93). Such a position results in the ethnocentrism described earlier by Kent, and forces scholars interested in the possibilities of communication across difference to locate pre-linguistic means of explaining identifications.

Recently, Theresa Kulbaga investigated how “rhetorics of empathy” (which in Kulbaga’s argument function the same as Burke’s notion of identification) help individuals make connections across cultures. Through reading and discussing the lives of others, Kulbaga claims people can cultivate rhetorical empathy as the “ability to imagine another as a distinct and unique individual” (517). In other words, empathy, “the vicarious, and spontaneous sharing of affect,” which supposedly allows us to “mirror what a person might be expected to feel in [a particular] condition or context,” is intended to provide a pre-linguistic explanation of how our physiology allows us to share meaning with the other (Keen, “Narrative Empathy” 208). The problem, of course, for Kulbaga and others, who appeal to emotional constructs like empathy as sites for identification, is that these connections exist only as an unspoken hypothetical. As soon as a speaker begins to symbolically represent these connections through language they return to the present dilemma: reducing the other to the self. As Bernard-Donals argues, “The other is other only to the extent that we can identify features of an interlocutor” (37). Empathy,

when bound to the notion that all discourse mediates between the self/world, culture/nature, simply functions as a means by which a person reconciles the sights and sounds of the world, which includes the other, to themselves through language. And, as Suzanne Keen points out, since we can only use discourse to articulate our perceptions of the other's experience into our own idiom, we are liable to engage in "empathetic inaccuracy," an affective response at "cross-purposes" with the other's intentions (222). In other words, we cannot locate the *meaning* of the other's discourse because we cannot share closely enough the conceptual schemes that shape their discursive acts. Thus, Keen and Kulbaga, use empathy as a conceptual scheme, and inadvertently demonstrate the limits of viewing empathy and identifications as constructionist processes. For the constructionist, to empathize with the other is to project one's subjectivity—how he or she apperceives the world—onto another .

Claiming to know the minds of others without reducing them to a linguistic version of the self remains the glaring problem for rhetoricians exploring the discursive problems created by increased globalization. More than ever it is crucial that rhetoric and composition studies demonstrate its capacity as a discipline to offer descriptions of how communication occurs across perceived differences. As I hope my argument to this point has demonstrated, there is no useful definition of identification derived from a view of discourse that maintains the ontological distinction between language and reality, culture and nature. Post-structuralism and postmodernism have effectively demonstrated the limitations of viewing language as a representational medium, and there seems no usefulness to continue making these critiques. It seems the only way forward is, as

Yarbrough encourages, to “drop the concepts of language and reality” altogether and instead focus our attention on how to describe the causal effects of communicative interaction.

Davidson, frustrated with the implications of believing in the ontological distinctions between nature and language/culture, offers an alternative description of how communication functions, a view that neither imagines speakers as sharing the same conceptual schemes nor being so radically other as to make communication impossible. Building from his early work on *radical interpretation*, Davidson, in the essay “The Second Person,” posed the question “How many competent speakers of language must there be if anyone can be said to speak or understand a language?” (107). In answering the question Davidson points out the problems of believing that all speakers are speakers of their own language. Davidson reminds the relativist that “in order to mean something a speaker must intend to have a certain effect on a specific hearer or hearers” (112). Meaning, from Davidson position, signals temporally bound interactions between speakers in which meaning and truth are part of the same process. If, as Bernard-Donals suggests, everyone is “singularly infinite” and speaks her own language then there is no way to describe without contradiction the process by which speakers direct the attention of others. At best, a theory of rhetorical identifications that adheres to the classic distinction between nature/language *and* embraces Bernard-Donals notion “that otherness (difference) cannot be overcome through discourse but is made radically evident *through* discourse” would only be able to suggest that any identifications (any shared meaning) made between interlocutors is simply luck – it cannot be explained, recognized or

recreated (39). Ultimately, the idea that interlocutors can construct identifications with others is simply a hypothetical position that can never be verified.

As Davidson points out, however, speakers are not concerned only with the hypothetical or the abstract: “Our practical, as opposed to our purely theoretical, interest in linguistic phenomena is this: we want to understand the actual utterances of others, and we want our utterances to be understood” (“Second Person” 109). Davidson points out, however, that if our discursive differences arise from adherence to conceptual schemes, which cannot be translated by others, then the problem with understanding any propositional belief, like the rhetorical identifications that discursively connect us to others, stems from “the assumption that communication by speech requires that speaker and interpreter have learned or somehow acquired a common method or theory of interpretation” an impossibility given the prevailing notion that deems a person’s discourse as relative to a conceptual scheme and infinitely singular (*Essential* 265). In the end, there is no way around this complication – if language mediates experience and all languages are unique, communication, to know the mind of the other, is impossible, *if* we continue to believe that ontological differences exist between “language” and “reality,” “words” and “things.” If interlocutors choose to abandon the notion that language has “causal properties” on its own without human involvement, then descriptions of discourse interactions are no longer rooted in the Cartesian duality of internal subjectivity / external objectivity; rather, language simply provides a description of how people use marks, noises and gestures to affect others by directing their attention to an object of common

cause, which is precisely the description of language Davidson begins to construct when he discusses the notion of *triangulation*.¹

Since it is impossible to suggest that interlocutors could somehow internalize every prior experience of their discourse partner and thereby respond in exactly the same fashion, communication, Davidson concludes, requires a “minimal theory,” one that can explain how we understand each other in a given discursive interaction, but also a theory that breaks from the problems created by viewing communication as the sharing of conceptual schemes. Davidson offers triangulation as this minimal theory. Davidson illustrates this concept by describing a scene in which an adult speaker and a child interact around a table. When the child makes a noise similar to the noise the adult speaker makes for table, the child is encouraged to continue vocalizing. As adult and child encounter other tables in the future, the adult again encourages the child when she verbalizes in a way that denotes her attempt to vocalize, “table.” This pattern of interaction Davidson summarizes as follows: “The child finds tables similar; we find tables similar; and we find the child’s response in the presence of tables similar. It now makes sense to call the responses of the child responses to tables” (119).

The interaction between adult, child and table form the points of triangulation. “The relevant stimuli are the objects or events we naturally find similar (tables) which are correlated with responses of the child we find similar”; thus, “it is a form of triangulation: one line goes from the child in the direction of the table, one line goes from us in the direction of the table and the third line goes between us and the child. Where the lines from child to table and us to table converge ‘the’ stimulus is located” (119). While the

stimulus in this example is a table, objects for Davidson are conceptual as well as material, which leads Davidson to conclude, “The considerations I have put forward do not apply to language only; they apply equally to thought in general. Belief, intention, and the other propositional attitudes are all social in that they are states a creature cannot be in without having the concept of intersubjective truth” (121). Davidson offers, then, a causal description of discourse, eschewing the notion that communication involves a process of interpreting another’s conceptual scheme by translating another’s idiosyncratic use of symbols. Instead of positing meaning as relative to a conceptual scheme, Davidson argues, as Thomas Kent observes, that “mental states [beliefs, intentions, and other propositional attitudes] come into being through the interactions of three elements: someone who thinks, other sentient beings, and a world they know they share” (431). Or, to draw upon the pragmatism of George Herbert Mead, meaning *emerges as we discourse*.

As Davidson and Kent’s remarks imply, a causal view of discourse eliminates the problem of conceptual relativism because nothing like social norms or cultural conventions mediate meaning between speakers. Rather, from a Davidsonian perspective, our internal mental states derive from discursive interaction, which is to say, we cannot make meaning concerning the objects of common cause by appealing to internalized conceptual schemes – our interlocutor has no access to such concepts; the only way to verify that we are sharing meaning with the other is to know that we are directing our partner’s attention to the intended objects of our discourse. In other words, interpretation “can not be reduced to a shared repertoire, grammar, system of reading conventions, or

interpretive framework Interpretation in other words, cannot be reduced to something usually called linguistic competence” (Kent, “On the Very Idea” 432). Every discursive interaction is unique and temporally bound.

While Davidson’s concept of triangulation provides a description of how discourse occurs, it does not explain how previous discourse experiences influence a speaker’s utterances during a discursive event. Communicative intercourse, as Davidson makes clear, is always a discreet and unique event, but these events do not, as Bakhtin remarks, represent speakers disturbing “the external silence of the universe” (951). Rather, speakers approach discursive encounters with the beliefs, intentions, attitudes, developed during previous triangulations – these internal mental states derived from external acts of discourse is what Davidson refers to as a *prior theory*. An interlocutor’s prior theories develop from previous communication events, which is to say they represent experiences with others and objects, but these previous experiences have little affect on future interactions. According to Davidson, “for the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker. . . . For the speaker, the prior theory is what he *believes* the interpreter’s prior theory to be” (261). Prior theories are something like a speaker’s “basic linguistic competence,” which a speaker “shares with those with whom he communicates” (261). Speakers’ prior theories are helpful insofar as they identify the beliefs, intentions, and attitudes derived previously and these propositional attitudes will no doubt affect the initial marks, noises, and gestures a speaker uses to direct the attention of another toward the objects of discourse; however, “what interpreter and speaker share, to the extent that

communication succeeds, is not learned and so is not a language governed by rules or conventions known to the speaker and interpreter in advance is not (necessarily) shared.” For Davidson, sharing meaning occurs through establishing a *passing theory*.

Whereas prior theories represent the ways in which speakers intend to discourse *preceding* the actual discursive event, *passing theories* represent the discursive moves enacted as communication *proceeds*. “The passing theory,” Davidson writes, “is how he [interpreter] *does* interpret the utterance” of his interlocutor and for the speaker the passing theory describes the interpretive theory she “*intends* the interpreter to use” (260-261). Thus, the passing theory names “where agreement is greatest” between interlocutors because it is where interlocutors demonstrate the ability to anticipate the utterances of the other (261). Triangulation, then, names the “cast of characters” involved in a discursive interaction, while the *passing theory* describes the phase of discourse in which interlocutors recognize they are in fact responding to the same objects in a shared world. Communication depends not on sharing a common language, culture, or conceptual scheme; rather, communication depends upon the ability of interlocutors to recognize how they each use marks, noises and gestures in response to objects, and thereby understanding describes the phase of discourse where speakers’ gestures are similar enough to direct the partner’s attention to the same objects. When interlocutors begin to understand each other they have entered into a passing theory, and it is during this passing phase of discourse that commitments emerge and are maintained. In other words, the epistemological end of discursive triangulation is the passing phase of discourse because this is where meaning emerges.

From Davidson's perspective, shared meaning prior to discursive interactions is impossible. Davidson makes this point clear when he writes: "For two people to know of each other that they are so related, that their thoughts are so related, requires that they be in communication" ("Second Person" 121). Communication, defined by discursive triangulation "begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects" (*Essential* 236). To share meaning from the perspective of a discursive interactionist means to experience discourse holistically—environmental conditions, objects and others make our world and beliefs known to us. Once we triangulate with an interlocutor, "we sufficiently understand someone's utterances or someone understands ours – we consequently know the mind of another, the world we share, and, of course, our own mind" (Kent, "On the Very Idea" 434). Shared meaning then is not a serendipitous addendum to knowledge; rather discursive interaction suggests that all meaning emerges in our sharing with others.

Triangulation, then, provides a minimal theory in the sense that it explains how interlocutors can share meaning without assuming that they must share conceptual schemes. As Davidson notes, triangulation is an alternative account of discursive competence "that doesn't depend upon people doing the same thing" (Kent, "Language Philosophy" 11). It is also minimalist in terms of its presumed efficacy, or as Anis Bawarshi summarizes, "every communicative act becomes a dialectical hermeneutic, an on-the-spot interaction that lasts only as long as the triangulation lasts" ("Beyond Dicotomy" 73). If all "Belief, intention, and the other propositional attitudes are all social in that they are states a creature cannot be in without have the concept of intersubjective

truth,” then identifications and the sharing of meaning are temporally bound to those moments of discursive interaction (Davidson, “Second Person” 121). The experiences we take away from our discursive encounters may eventually become *prior theories* or *commitments*; however, these commitments have little to do with triangulation.

Yarbrough rightly simplifies the sharing of meaning via triangulation when he writes, “The difference between expectations and their fulfillment establishes the norm of communicative success” (*Inventive* 21). Communication is bound by the temporality of actual intercourse and the interlocutor’s knowledge that the other is intentionally directing her attention toward objects of common cause. Without all points of the triangle engaged in *sharing meaning* establishing a passing theory is impossible.

Our discourse with the other is the same as any other interaction in the physical world: our responses are shaped by the specific conditions. Our noises, marks, and gestures are intended to illicit responses from the other with regard to an object of common concern. In other words, it is impossible to “know” the “meaning” of an object without being actively involved in collaboration—discursive triangulation. This description of communication as *triangulation* does not claim to predict or know the value a speaker places on particular objects, but it does allow for interlocutors to know what the other’s concepts are concepts of, i.e. the objects with which they both interact. “If we consider a single creature by itself,” Davidson writes, “its responses, no matter how complex, cannot show that it is reacting to, or thinking about, events a certain distance away rather than, say, its own skin. The solipsist’s world can be any size; which is to say, from the solipsist’s point of view it has no size, it is not a world” (119). To

know that we have concepts concerning objects, whether these be the beliefs concerning political institutions or matters of spirituality, requires that we be in collaboration with other interlocutors in the one world because these discursive interactions provide us the means by which we verify our actions toward objects. “The constitution of objects of the interlocutors’ attention, their interpretation of the discourse, and their comprehension of the relations between the objects and their discourse are one in the same event: objects become objects *for us*” (“Modes” Yarbrough 498). Rather than assuming interlocutors’ incommensurability, discursive interactionism assumes that speakers can say with certainty when they share meaning, which is another way of saying that rhetorical identifications are always identifications *with regards to* another *and* an object of common cause.

The pragmatic, contingent, and temporal nature of Davidson’s theory is instrumental in helping scholars like Dasenbrock, Kent, and Yarbrough determine that rhetoric and composition studies should no longer teach that rhetorical acts like writing are acquired through repeatable and codifiable processes. For Kent, “no process system can explain, in any precise way” how interlocutors come to share meaning (“Externalism” 69). This belief leads Kent to conclude that if rhetoricians took seriously the externalist position inspired by Davidson’s notion of radical interpretation then they would be “forced to acknowledge the impossibility of teaching writing and critical reading as an epistemologically centered body-of-knowledge” (“Paralogic” 35). As discussed earlier similar, Yarbrough offers “discourse studies” as an alternative approach to the traditional rhetoric and composition course and suggests that teachers of rhetoric

spend their time helping students “understand the objects of [their] own concerns, and to seek together the common causes of [their] questions and problems” (*After* 210). Every discursive encounter creates its own particular exigencies, and those problems, Kent reminds, “cannot be determined in advance for us by something like an ethnocentric discourse community” (“On the Very Idea” 442). To know the mind of the other and thereby create identifications through the sharing of meaning occurs in the “give-and-take of communicative interaction” (Kent “Ethnocentrism” 104), or as Davidson describes the communication, the experiencing of a passing theory, which “is like a theory at least in this, that it is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom” (265).

What Davidson and Kent do not explore, at least not fully, are the implications of a temporally bound and contingent definition of shared meanings on rhetoric and compositions’ current project of understanding the other. In concluding this chapter, I want to suggest that each phase of discursive interactionism depends upon the sharing of meaning between interlocutors and the objects of their discourse. In this way *pragmatic empathy* is the essential methodology the emergence of passing theories. Moreover, pragmatic empathy is a definition of intersubjectivity that neither reduces the other to a version of the self nor perpetuates the notion of “radical otherness,” which supposedly makes shared meaning an impossibility. If, as Gary Olson contends, globalization forces each of us to re-evaluate our experiences with others because we can no longer appeal to “the bulky, impersonal apparatus of official ethics” (85), then it seems fairly clear that rhetoric and composition studies needs a methodology for how we *know each other in discourse* and not another description of how we imagine the other *after the (f)act of*

discourse. To conclude this chapter, then, I offer *pragmatic empathy* as the method by which *passing theories* are discovered, maintained, and changed.

(An)other Way: *Passing Through Pragmatic Empathy*

Davidson's description of *passing theory* provides the necessary first step in describing an alternative version of rhetorical identification. Specifically, Davidson's idea leads to an understanding of shared meaning that I call *pragmatic empathy*. Triangulation demonstrates that sharing meaning emerges through the discursive interactions of at least two interlocutors and an object of common cause. As Yarbrough summarizes, "in order for communication to succeed, the interaction cannot be only an interaction between interlocutors with words," but "it must also be an interaction between interlocutors with words *with things they can share*" ("Modes" 494). I want to conclude this chapter by illustrating how rhetorical identifications are imbedded in the *passing* experience, and are defined by interlocutors sharing objects of common cause and thereby responding to each other as (an)other, the critical term I will define and use to challenge to prevailing assumption that interlocutors remain radically "other." Defining *pragmatic empathy* thus begins in clarifying the pragmatic nature of *passing*.

C.S. Peirce summarized pragmatism's orientation toward meaning in the following way: "Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearing you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your conception of those effects is the *whole* of your conception of the object" (192). Peirce's description of what it means to *know something* is bound up in the notion that knowing is the same as understanding

the effects objects have in the world. Moreover, as Peirce's comment makes clear, pragmatist thinking, like Davidson's notion of radical interpretation, is "fully interactionist," which is to say, "learning together what things *are* is the *same* process as learning what the words that refer to those things *mean* (Yarbrough "Modes" 494). For the interactionist, *passing* denotes the phase of discourse where interlocutors recognize their emergent intersubjectivity because "their comprehension of the relations between the objects and their discourse are one and the same event: objects become objects *for us*" (497). The sharing of meaning, then, is a causal experience; we use discourse to coordinate our interactions with another interlocutor and we direct our attentions toward objects of common cause. When we respond to the same objects, we have entered into the *passing* phase of discourse, a description of meaning that shares a great deal with pragmatist thinking.

As Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly point out, the pragmatic method is one that "explains how theories and practices work together," and therefore what is "true" is also that which is effective in meeting the requirements of inquirers (618). Rather than focusing on prior assumptions (which function in the same fashion as prior theories) pragmatism emphasizes the making of meaning through experience and observation (618). Ronald and Roskelly also point out that one of the philosophical tenets of pragmatism is its belief that meaning making is "a process of observation, hypothesizing, and experimenting" in which "an idea is defined by its consequences" (619). This summary of the pragmatic method sounds almost exactly like Davidson's description of how interlocutors interact in order to arrive at a passing theory. Davidson writes, "a

passing theory really is like a theory at least in this, that it is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom” (265). Or, in other words, interlocutors arrive at passing theories pragmatically by observing their partner’s responses to objects, hypothesizing how best to direct each other’s attention and then determining whether their discursive efforts successfully directed the other toward the object of common cause. As Kent and Yarbrough point out, however, the meaning of objects is bound to the specific temporal dimension of the discursive interaction. The meanings we share with others during the passing theory, which is simply another way of saying the discursive identifications we recognize during intercourse, are contingent and bound to the specific exigencies of the interlocutors’ encounter.

To view shared meaning as contingent, mutable and temporal, is of course pragmatic. For the pragmatist, meaning is “communal, not uniquely individual” and “it is contingent, determined by the special characteristics of the sites of inquiry” (Ronald and Roskelly 619). Shared meaning occurs as speaker and objects triangulate, and this process arises within a particular context, or “to put it slightly differently, the principle purpose of discourse is to determine in what sense what the other says is true, for knowing the conditions in which what the other says is true is the same thing as knowing what the other means” (Yarbrough “Not Yet” 9). Since meaning and truth occur simultaneously as a result of understanding the conditions that make our discourse true, shared meaning is bound up in the particular environmental context of the discursive situation (this position has profound pedagogical implications that will be explored in the next chapter). Change the conditions and you will inevitably change the meaning.

Moreover, changes to conditions occur in the midst of discourse, that is to say, *passing theories* are not stable entities that exist in a present moment; rather, *passing theories*, continually form and re-form in the midst of evolving discourse.

It is not enough, however, to simply say that intersubjectivity develops pragmatically and emerge in the *passing theory*. This description is incomplete because as the principle of charity makes clear, triangulation only proceeds if we believe our interlocutor. Thus, *pragmatic empathy* is holistic; it is part of every phase of discursive interaction. We must share with others the belief that we can share (the principle of charity) prior to discourse, and we must share as we triangulate if want to determine the relevant conditions and relations shaping the other's conception of objects. That is to say, in order for discursive triangulation to occur, interlocutors need to believe that they could in fact be (an)other – one capable of responding to the world and the objects in it in the same fashion as the other with who they discourse.

As Davidson makes clear to claim that we can speak a language and thereby direct another person's attention to specific objects in the world "there must be another sentient being whose innate similarity responses are sufficiently like his own to provide an answer to the question, what is the stimulus to which the speaker is responding" (120). Simply, "a condition for being a speaker is that there must be others enough like oneself" (120). This claim challenges the prevailing, albeit "heady and exotic" doctrine that every speaker is radically other. As Bernard –Donals points out, the ethical dilemma in studying rhetoric as a means of creating intersubjective meaning with others is that "the other is other only to the extent that we can identify features of an interlocutor," which

implies that “difference is never altogether different” (37). The problem with Bernard-Donals position, then, is relatively straightforward: he must think everyone, including himself, speaks non-sense.

To imagine that the only way to avoid ethnocentrism is to assume that all speakers are “radically other” simply destroys the possibility of communicating. If speakers can never share meaning, or, at the very least, never know when they do, communication is rendered irrelevant, and the only purpose of studying discourse would be to identify those discursive situations that *really* create problems (Bernard-Donals view that discourse does not lead to shared meaning is not unique, and it perhaps helps to explain why so many composition courses “teach the controversies”). Thus, Bernard-Donals believes discourse can only highlight the differences between “ourselves [sic] and the neighbor” differences that “cannot be traversed” (48). In other words, Bernard-Donals believes it is impossible to create identifications and share meaning because we cannot fundamentally understand what each other *means*. Consequently, the other can only speak non-sense because we have no way of verifying *via* conceptual schemes the truth conditions that make the other’s discourse meaningful.

Bernard-Donals problem is precisely the same problem Yarbrough sees when speakers appeal to conceptual schemes. In assuming that conceptual schemes mediate our experiences in the world, we “divorce the determination of meaning from the determination of truth” (492). That is, events occurring in the physical world are “truths” only insofar as they remain pre-discursive. For these events to *mean* something, however, requires the assistance of a conceptual scheme (like language or culture) to function as a

medium between internal cognition of the mind and the external physical world.

Discursive triangulation specifically addresses claims like those made by Bernard-Donals: we can share meaning because it is pragmatic (contingent, mutable, and temporal) but also because triangulation allows for speakers to remain *different and intelligible*. That is, in order to communicate with another person we have to, at the very least, hold them in high enough regard to believe that their uses of marks, noises, and gestures have the same systematic coherency as we intend of our discursive acts. As Yarbrough suggests, “we cannot doubt what do not first understand, and we cannot understand what we are not prepared to believe” (*Inventive* 22). For triangulation, and thereby communication, to occur requires only that interlocutors are willing to believe that the other is *trying* to direct their attention to particular objects, and while this seems a simple belief, the implications of such a belief challenge the notion of radical otherness that lies at the heart to contemporary rhetorical theory.

To claim that the other is directing our attention in ways at least as systematic as our own, is to say that we, if in the same situation, under the same conditions, and addressing the same purposes, would respond in a similar fashion. To enter into a passing theory is to know when causes converge, when objects of common cause become objects for both parties as a result of triangulation. Discursive triangulation explains the process of how propositional attitudes arise – we cannot *know anything* unless triangulation occurs. Moreover, the other’s discursive acts must be “knowingly and intentionally” responses to the same stimuli. That is, “the only way of knowing the second apex of the triangle – the second creature or person – is reacting to the same object as oneself is to

know that the other person has the same object in mind” (Davidson, *Subjective* 121). Therefore, even if the other’s discursive practices “differ from our own, we may through charity assume to be affected by the same or similar conditions that affect our own” (Yarbrough, *Inventive* 63). When our discourse draws the attention of the other to the object we have in mind, we are also highlighting the conditions that make them object *for us*. Conversely, when the other responds to the same stimulus, the same object we intend by our discourse, we can assume she is experiencing the object under similar conditions. The other, then, is responding as another would when affected by similar conditions, which is to say, triangulation that leads to a passing theory is defined by pragmatic empathy.

Pragmatic empathy describes when acts of discourse allow interlocutors to recognize common stimuli, and thereby share the contingent, mutable, and temporal meaning that occurs as a result of sharing affect. Pragmatic empathy replaces the social constructionist notion of rhetorical identification, which, like any conceptual scheme, can never avoid the problems associated with relativism or ethnocentrism. As we have seen, the most influential aspect of Burke’s notion of identification—the view that shared meaning that is determined prior to discourse—remains unverifiable because Burke (or anyone else for that matter) does not offer a description of how discursive interactions with the other warrant these determinations. In contrast, pragmatic empathy offers a fully interactionist definition of what it means to come to share meaning with (an)other—an interlocutor who neither has to use discourse in the same way nor share the same socio-historical experiences as we. Instead, (an)other simply refers to an interlocutor with

whom we share the experience of triangulation. From this view, *emergent intersubjectivity* is not a rhetorical construction in the sense that the “truth” of these connections between interlocutors is relative to the “meaning” their conceptual schemes can provide. Rather, pragmatic empathy illustrates that there are no schemes, only a shared world.

(An)Other Way Forward

Discursive conflict, which names interlocutors’ struggles to triangulate their discourse with others and objects in the world, is the central concern of *discourse studies*.³ As Yarbrough notes, “Discourse is motivated by the perception of differences, by the disparities between the responses that we expect to our utterances and the actual responses we receive” (*After* 9). These disparities, however, do not signal that we are “radically other”; rather, our experiences in the world encourage people to organize their commitments in differing fashions. Sometimes these differences are minimal. Speakers that grow up in close proximity and under similar conditions may arrive at passing theories more quickly, and thereby experience pragmatic empathy more frequently. In a similar fashion, speakers from different backgrounds may have a more difficult time sharing meaning.

Whether the process of communication is relatively easy or difficult, however, is irrelevant. Instead of thinking of “cultures, backgrounds, and periods” as “sort of blocks that are fixed one way or another,” Davidson proposes, “we might think of them as just variance which we understand in terms of what we share and see ourselves as sharing”

(Kent, "Language Philosophy" 12). Davidson continues, "Understanding other cultures is not different from understanding our next door neighbor, except in degree. It's not a difference in kind" (12). Yarbrough shares a view similar to Davidson's when writes, "we *all* are aliens, always" (*After* 7). Too often, then, "we are faced with these differences," and assume "what's required to understand" is "an entirely different kind of act" (12). That is, when confronted with difference, speakers imagine that how we typically interact and understand our world will not help us understand the other. Moreover, since *we believe* our ways of discoursing with others will not allow us to communicate, we assume that discursive conflict marks irreconcilable differences among people, cultures, languages, etc. This belief, and I agree with Davidson on this point, is "dangerous" because "it leads us away from simply doing our best to accommodate somebody else's view of the world" (12).

I believe Davidson's comments are also useful when thinking about traditional notions of rhetorical identification. Too often, speakers believe that to share meaning with the other is impossible because the supposed differences our discourse must traverse are too great, or because the speaker's beliefs are too naïve by assuming that we can actually empathize with others in a way that does not reduce them to a version of the self. Instead of remaining locked into these problems of social constructionist thinking, pragmatic empathy offers an interactionist description of how meaning is shared. Pragmatic empathy is inextricably woven into the fabric of discursive triangulation and is therefore part of what it means to communicate. In short, pragmatic empathy *offers* (*an*)*other* way of approaching discourse, and given the problems associated with

globalization, we are in need of alternative theories of what it means to share meaning with others.

As I explained in the previous chapter, if we choose to understand beliefs as *commitments*, which emerge through discourse, then emergent intersubjectivity is necessary in order to claim we hold any beliefs whatsoever. Moreover, because our *commitments* are commitments about how we interact with objects and others, we are able to determine when we are sharing meaning: we do when we respond in similar fashion to similar objects in similar conditions. In other words, *pragmatic empathy names the method that allows collaborative engagement between all apexes of the discursive triangle*. Take away (an)other or the object of discourse and so goes the potential for intersubjectivity.

Pragmatic empathy infers *collaboration*, as I will define in the next chapter, and any discussion of its pedagogical uses must explore this orientation to discourse. The fourth and final chapter will examine the pedagogical implications of examining discursive conflict from the perspective of pragmatic empathy, and how these types of examinations require a collaborative environment that allows students to understand the degrees of difficulty involved in trying to understand the other. In other words, changing our definition of what it means to identify with the other, necessarily forces upon us the project of re-imagining what it means to know when identification is possible. Now we must imagine how and why would speakers employ pragmatic empathy as a means of settling discursive conflict?

NOTES

1. Anis Bawarshi, Matthew Snead, and Thomas Kent all deal, at great length, with the implications of Cartesian dualism. Interestingly, it is Cartesian dualism that Marco Iacoboni's sees as the philosophical roadblock to a more interdisciplinary application of mirror neuron research because so much of Western thought depends upon dualistic thinking.

2. Much can be said about Davidson's emphasis on "objects of discourse," but one of the issues I find fascinating, but am unable to explore in this project is how interactionism changes our understanding of lying. When language is understood as a medium, lying is indistinguishable from truth – both misrepresent the actual world because language cannot fulfill its representational function. For the interactionist, however, speaker's can only direct others toward objects of discourse. That is, we choose which objects to direct the other's attention toward and assume they will interact with the object in the same fashion. In this way, interactionism does not have a concept of "lying," but it also does not hold to the poststructuralist view that even our best efforts at shared meaning are misguided. Instead, interactionism understands all discourse as deliberate and intentional.

3. I am indebted here to Stephen R. Yarbrough and his comments on an earlier draft that helped me rethink the nature of discursive conflict and its generative potential.

CHAPTER V

ON SHARING THE WORLD WITH OTHERS

“If this analysis of discourse production and rhetorical analysis proves valid, we are forced to deny the possibility that textbooks can represent adequately the acts of producing and analyzing discourse, more important, we are forced to acknowledge the impossibility of teaching writing and critical reading as an epistemologically centered body-of –knowledge.” Thomas Kent

Since pragmatic empathy influences every phase of discursive interaction, it is impossible to offer pedagogical practices that will “construct” these moments on demand. Rather, interactionism, as demonstrated throughout this study, assumes the social nature of discourse, and in many ways the pedagogical implications of pragmatic empathy begin by unpacking Davidson’s pronouncement that, “Belief, intention, and the other propositional attitudes are all social in that they are states a creature cannot be in without having the concept of intersubjective truth” (121). Since pragmatic empathy emerges through the sociality of discourse, extrapolating its pedagogical implications involves creating classroom practices that remain cognizant and attuned to the socially inventive nature of discourse. That is, if pragmatic empathy is a pedagogical aim, then the classroom practices must be conducive to discursive interaction. Since we cannot, as the Kent quotation suggests, prescribe techniques or practices that will lead to specific outcomes, I want to close this project by suggesting that an interactionist writing pedagogy needs to focus on how pragmatic empathy informs our approach discursive

encounters with others. In order to share meaning, as we will see, interlocutors must understand the locally and temporally bound nature of pragmatic empathy.

In the end, I hope that by highlighting these methods I will supply a more robust vocabulary for an interactionist pedagogy, one which can help in rethinking the goals of the typical first-year writing course. Of course, in order to remain committed to my own theoretical beliefs, I cannot claim that any of these methods will necessarily lead to clear and codifiable outcomes; rather, I hope these ideas provide the impetus for further conversation and allow rhetoric and composition to more fully explore the usefulness of interactionism to the study of discourse. I can only claim that at the moment, and given my previous experiences, these methods provide a starting point for a more substantial dialogue with other teachers of rhetoric and composition. And, of course, like all commitments, these are subject to change as a result of these interactions with others.

Pragmatist Collaboration – Interactionism’s Methodological Imperative

Following Peirce’s pragmatism, how we understand the consequential effects an object brings to bear on the world defines our beliefs about that object. Peirce’s pragmatism is central to interactionist thinking, but the complexity of this thinking often frustrates students. Therefore, an essential first step in pedagogies based around interactionism is to demonstrate the centrality of consequence to— objects become objects for us only as we interact with them. My hope is to demonstrate to students that language is not a medium through which experiences are made meaningful; rather, language, a description of the marks, noises, and gestures we use to affect others, *is a constitutive*

element of the world. Or as Yarbrough states, “Discourse is part of the world in the same way that an organism is part of its environment,” which is to say, change our marks, noises, and gestures, and we necessarily change the world (*Inventive* 14).

By emphasizing the difference between communication as “correspondence” and discourse as “casually indicative” I am modeling the pragmatic method. For William James, “The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me at a definite instance in our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one” (114). Therefore, a pragmatic methodology should explore problems for the sake of locating differences that have effects in the world, and if differences in their effects cannot be located, then there is no difference in their meaning. Exploring the “Save Darfur” campaign on the social-networking site Facebook provides a contemporary rhetorical problem that helps students unpack the implications of James’ pragmatic maxim. The “Save Darfur” campaign on Facebook seeks to “raise awareness” about the genocide that haunts the people of Darfur. Facebook users can sign an online position statement that provides readers with the “awareness” necessary for putting up a “Save Darfur” hyperlink on the user’s “wall-page.” The “Save Darfur” group has more members than any other “awareness” group on Facebook, and the organization, which also raises funds to send to the war torn regions of Sudan, has been able to leverage this growing sense of awareness into roughly six cents of donation money per “Save Darfur” member. Thus, when one asks the pragmatic question, “what is the altruistic difference between someone who is “aware” of Darfur’s genocide and one that is not?” the pragmatist must answer, “six cents.” Words like “save” and “awareness” seems to

suggest the primacy of action. But, as this Facebook example demonstrates, the conceptual object of “awareness” mean something quite different depending upon the environments in which we are interacting with the term.

What this very simple, albeit practical example, especially for young first-year writers, of the “Save Darfur” group demonstrates is that meaning, in its everyday use, is not referential. That is, words do not refer to true things. Words, as David Bleich reminds, create meaning in the midst of use (xv). Therefore, in this example, to identify as a member of the “Save Darfur” cause in the context of Facebook, entails displaying a hyperlink on a personal web page, not volunteering to work in Sudan or pamphleteering door-to-door. What objects mean (and here “Save Darfur” is a conceptual object) depends upon the specific conditions and the others with whom we discourse. Or, as Hepzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald might suggest, a pragmatic view of discourse understands that meaning is defined by consequences (619). In other words, a pragmatic, interactionist approach to rhetoric deemphasizes the representational function of “language” and instead focuses on the material consequences that our beliefs about objects bring to bear on the world. That is, pragmatism promotes precisely the same epistemology alluded to in Davidson’s statement, “speaking a language...does not depend on two or more speakers speaking in the same way; it merely requires that each speaker intentionally make himself interpretable to the other” (“Second Person” 115).

Like the pragmatists, Davidson is concerned with what Kevin Porter calls “meaning consequentialism,” the connection between meaning, action, and time. Davidson is suspicious of the notion that “meaning” is simply the function of

correspondence between words and things. Instead, Davidson's criticism of conceptual schemes leads him to a causal explanation of communication – meaning, causes, and reasons are all part of the same discursive process. Davidson names this process *triangulation* and argues that it answers the question, “How many competent speakers of a language must there be if anyone can be said to speak or understand a language?” (107). As we have seen, the answer Davidson gives is at least two. To speak a language, and by extension share a culture or a history, is to share meaning with the other. Thus, like the pragmatists, Davidson understands consequences as characteristics of meaning; knowing anything is the consequence of intersubjectivity. Therefore, when he writes that speakers make themselves “interpretable to the other,” he is highlighting the centrality of pragmatist collaboration to discursive triangulation. That is, to be interpretable to the other is to engage in pragmatist collaboration, which I define as *interlocutors deliberately affecting the other's interactions with objects, thereby influencing what the other will practically bring to bear on his conception of the object*.

The result of pragmatist collaboration, which, as should be clear, is simply another name for interactionism, is the following: *Pragmatist Collaboration refers to the continual inventive processes through which two or more individuals engage in reflexive interaction in order to identify objects under particular, changing conditions*. As I have argued, pragmatic empathy names the method through which interlocutors develop *passing theories* and thereby *meaning* with regards to the objects of their attention. This method is inherently collaborative. That is, emergent intersubjectivity is simply another way of saying that interlocutors recognize and respond to the objects emerging through

the collaborative process of discourse. Thus, discourse is, as Yarbrough argues in *After Rhetoric and Inventive Intercourse*, an intrinsically inventive and collaborative process, and any pedagogy attempting to draw upon interactionist thinking must keep invention and collaboration at the heart of the discussion.

Perhaps the most profound pedagogical implication of interactionist epistemology is that to “teach writing” is irrelevant. “What is required to teach writing?” is an unanswerable question because discourse simply *is* – human beings discourse in order to interact with the world; therefore, discourse itself cannot be a problem. As Yarbrough argues, drawing upon and adapting the work of the pragmatist George Herbert Mead, discourse is simply there for us; therefore, problems of communication *arise within discourse*, but are not problems of discourse’s representational capacity to accurately name the world of experience. The inventive nature of discourse requires that pedagogies associated with *discourse studies* focus on how inventive processes occur, or, perhaps more accurately, provide opportunities for students to understand how changing the conditions of triangulation changes the meaning we share with others. That is, if triangulation names the interaction between interlocutors and objects, a pedagogical approach to discourse studies with an emphasis on pragmatic empathy, includes an examination of both how environmental conditions (place and time) effect discursive outcomes and how interlocutors determine when they have entered into triangulation. The latter requires an understanding of how we recognize other interlocutive beings with whom pragmatic empathy is possible.

As Kent and Yarbrough contend, when discourse is no longer viewed as the product of conceptual schemes, then it is impossible to claim that we can “teach discourse,” or “teach writing.” As Yarbrough quips, “All we can say about the teaching of life we can say about the teaching of discourse because once we erase the distinction between language and things, nature and culture, we have erased the difference between say and doing – and so to the difference between discourse and life” (*After* 213). Of course, these remarks are intended to caution teachers against holding the belief that writing develops as a result of codifiable practices and procedures that lead to effective prose, regardless of situational constraints. However, there is a difference between teaching and learning. I cannot tell students, much to their chagrin, how to “write” in every context and under every circumstance. But, I can help them experience particular discursive exigencies (those assignments and tasks I ask them to complete) in a particular context (the classroom conditions that make every teaching situation unique). That is to say, instructors may not be able to teach “how to write” but students can certainly learn “to write” – the discursive moves we make in particular situations, with particular objects, under particular conditions. A pedagogy that embraces an interactionist view of discourse cannot rely on the practices of traditional language study. Instead, an interactionist approach to first-year writing requires that teachers provide opportunity for students to explore the nuances of triangulation. That is, to help students develop discursive wisdom is to help them understand, through interactions with others in a shared world, the characteristics shaping discourse: objects and conditions.

Here and Now: The Discursive Conditions of Pragmatic Empathy

There is a tendency, as pointed out earlier by Theresa Kulbaga, to imagine that people might develop empathy and share meaning with others from a distance, even transnational distances. However, as pointed out by Marco Iacobani, mirror neurons suggest that mirroring the actions of another changes depending upon the subjects perceived spatial relationship to the other performing actions. When the subject is able to observe the actions of the other from a closer distance, more specific neurons fire; when the distance between subject and other increases, fewer and less specific neurons fire in the observer's brain. Simply, the closer a subject remains to the other with whom they are mirroring, the more closely their brain activity resembles each other.

Our genetic dispositions, then, suggest that proximity functions as a crucial component of identification. Thus, rather than continuing with the project of "examining the other" from a geographical and experiential distance (read: the literary study of the other), I argue that pragmatic empathy is unique to local discursive contexts because triangulation, like "mirroring" requires interlocutors to be in close proximity to each other. In other words, emergent intersubjectivity, does not take place beyond the physical frame of interlocutors' reference. The frame of reference for interaction, as Davidson's description makes clear, is the space in which interlocutors are capable of noticing each other's resistance to objects, which allows them to adapt their discourse accordingly. When readers and writers attempt to pragmatically empathize with those beyond the scope of their physical frame of reference, they are no longer in the realm of

triangulation; instead, as we will see, they are in the realm of speculation, or *non-discursive reflexivity*. When rhetors attempt to engage questions of identification with the absent other, through reading and writing, the outcomes of these “case-studies” are useful insofar as they help to construct prior theories that *may* be useful in future discursive encounters with interlocutive beings. In many ways, my claim appears to be counterintuitive: to share meaning with the other is a *local process*, which implies to know the other is to know our neighbor.¹

Deepika Bahri echoes my sentiment when she criticizes the emphasis contemporary theory places upon the relationship between physical distance and otherness, which results in the undervaluing of local discursive encounters. In her essay “Terms of Engagement,” Bahri highlights the often-ironic practice of examining postcolonial texts in order to “sensitize students to the other cultures” (77). The goal in using transnational texts is to help students experience the other in a deliberate, reflective and meaningful fashion; however, these experiences often come at the cost of the local. In these types of classroom environments, the other simultaneously represents difference *and* distance, “as always beyond the local shores” (77). Viewing the other in this fashion leads to the tendency to privilege “distance difference instead of examining the complex ways in which *difference and marginality are produced in particular contexts rather than being inherent by virtue of category*” (77). Thus, terms like “difference” and “other” are assumed to also mean “foreign” and “far away,” which leads students and teachers to assume that within the local borders of the classroom similarities between students are greater than their differences. Therefore, teachers and students often explore questions of

identification and empathy with the assumption that these practices only serve situations and environments beyond the walls of the classroom. As often is the case, students and teachers ignore the discursive exigencies present within local bodies for the supposedly more important work of imagining the distant other.²

Pragmatic empathy, however, as a phase of discursive interaction, which understands discourse as the human mode of interacting with the environment, views all interactions as unique, collaborative, and involving (an)other. The discursive moves we make, whether in the classrooms of American universities, the cafés of Florence, or the noodle-houses of Shanghai, will share common characteristics: our discursive moves represent adjustments in discourse as a result of environmental conditions, which include others and objects. In other words, becoming a more experienced rhetor capable of identifying with diverse audiences is something that *always* develops locally because discursive situations that lead to discursive identifications via pragmatic empathy are defined by the proximity of (an)other with whom to share affect in a particular time. That is, local interaction is also a temporal experience, or as George Herbert Mead suggests, discursive interaction, like all human action, occurs in the present, the locus of reality.

As I argued in the previous chapter, interactionism understands discourse as a unitary process: “what ‘chair’ means, what a chair *is*, and what to do with a chair and the word ‘chair’ are exactly the same process” (Yarbrough, “Passing” 85). Moreover, because “*there is no chair* except as a set of relations” between interlocutors and objects, to share the meaning of chairs is necessarily to share the meaning of chair *in a particular time* (85). Mead’s idea of the present helps make the importance of the temporal aspect of

discourse clear. As Mead suggests in *The Philosophy of the Present*, no measurement exists to objectively gauge the linearity of time, a concept that supposedly proceeds by mapping time onto a continuum. For time to exist in this fashion would require that competing fields of space exist. In simple terms, to *see* time would require a space outside of time, a view that ultimately disrupts physics and thereby the world.

Instead of imagining time as a continuum, which ultimately leads to totalizing historical interpretations and static understandings of experience, Mead suggests that people view all actions as *emerging* from the present, the locus of reality. As Mead states, “The world is a world of events” (35). That is, human beings cannot stop being a part of the movement of the world; instead, our attempts to understand events – to make meaning – is part of the “world of events.” We cannot stop to interpret the world and the other, because even these attempts serve as constitutive elements of what we recognize as the world. In Mead’s pragmatic understanding of being, past experiences are only past experiences insofar as we attribute this description to them in the present moment, and future possibilities are simply the name we give to the anticipatory emotions experienced under present conditions. What Mead provides for discourse studies, then, is an interactionist account of temporality, which carries with it a pedagogical imperative: to develop our capacity for identification also requires interlocutors to understand that shared meaning is bound to present conditions. Therefore, a pedagogy that takes discourse studies and discursive identification seriously is also a pedagogy that helps students reconsider the relationship between meaning and time, and the implications of such relationships to future discourse.

Before moving forward and examining a sample exercise that draws attention to locality and time, I want to caution against reading interactionism as a type of relativism. To say that meanings emerges under particular conditions with others and objects in a shared world implies that what an object means, in that space and time, is intersubjectively true. Interlocutors recognize and interact with the same object. And, it should also be noted, that simply because interlocutors recognize the same object does not mean that somehow they agree as to the implications of that object. Shared meaning's goal, as Davidson contends, "is to make meaningful disagreement possible" ("On the Very Idea" 207). The same can be said about objectivity. For the interactionist, meaning and truth name characteristics of the same discursive process. And, if interlocutors are able to reproduce the conditions in which objects emerged as objects for them, then the truth will remain. Of course, reproducing conditions, objects and interlocutors is difficult. Therefore a classroom guided by the principles of interactionism, needs to make helping students experience the difficulties of reproducing conditions one of its pedagogical aims.

The Collaborative Notebook (Appendix A) represents an assignment designed to engage questions of location and time with regard to discourse and highlight the inventive nature of discourse by demonstrating the difficult nature of reproducing conditions. While I have employed this assignment in a number of courses, I will keep my remarks centered on the use of this assignment in first-year composition. In focusing on the first-year compositions course, I am signaling my belief that *if* I, along with the others with whom I am drawing upon in this work, believe that discourse functions in this fashion then it seems imperative that I bring these commitments to bear on my pedagogy.

In other words, I do not find interactionism to be a purely theoretical pursuit; however, I do find pedagogical adaptations of interactionism very challenging. The notebook, then, represents a tentative means by which to address my theoretical commitments in the context of teaching first-year students.

The Collaborative Notebook holds a collection of student-produced artifacts and serves as a discussion piece for an end of semester conference between the student collaboratives and myself. Comprised of four to five members, chosen at random at the beginning of the semester, student collaboratives spend between one-third and one-half of class time each week working on their end-of-the semester projects. The end of the semester project is a class presentation that examines a “magnet text,” a novel or monograph that engages one of the central themes of the course, with regard to an issue, idea, event, or policy relevant to the first-year experience. The final project that I ask students to complete is nothing particularly revolutionary. Like many presentation assignments, the final product is intended to demonstrate the students’ capacity to make arguments about a text, make connections with other texts, and learn about working with others in a project setting. In the end, these final presentations tend to be insightful and well produced, and from developing them the students gain a sense of how intellectual arguments within the humanities develop. Generally, then, the collaborative notebook serves to “mark the journey” from the beginning of the semester to the final project, with particular attention paid to the collaborative’s discursive exchanges as they read, wrote, and discussed in support of their final project.

The Collaborative Notebook, it should be noted, accounts for a substantial portion of the final course grade, but students were informed at the beginning of the course that receiving an acceptable grade simply depended upon their ability to complete the tasks of the day, most of which involved writing of some sort and comprised the texts of the notebook. If collaboratives *did* the work, they would receive full credit. In lowering the stakes of the assignment's grade, I intended to highlight for students that this assignment sought to illustrate for them the central tenets of discourse—contingency, mutability, temporality, and collaboration—without fear of a high stakes assessment. Students read a number of texts during the course of the semester dealing with ideas associated with interactionism, identification, and empathy, and I provided handouts and lectures that reinforced these ideas. For the most part, however, it was not until the final exit interview that students began to grasp how the intersubjective meaning that emerged during their group's discursive interactions with each other depended heavily upon the particular situations – the time and place of interactions – within which they discoursed.

During the exit interview, I sought to highlight the distinct differences and similarities I perceived in the collected artifacts. When asked to explain why an ostensibly similar text elicited one type of response on one day, but a different type of response on another day, students tended to resort to a kind of cheap relativism. The differences marked their distinct personal styles. For example the influence of the chairperson might change the dynamics of the group, or the clarity of the secretary's notes might have skewed the information gathered on a particular day. And, while all of these observations *seemed* correct, students typically found the following question very

difficult to answer: “If you know the reasons behind these discrepancies, why did you not control the situation so that you spoke of ideas, concepts, and texts in a consistent fashion?” In other words, I was asking them a question derived from the social constructionist notion of “discourse community.” *If they were a group and they developed a shared sense of knowledge about the texts they engaged* (as most groups claimed they had) *why did shared meaning about the same objects change over time?*

The tendency is to answer the question in the following way: “we learned more about our subject as we progressed through the semester and therefore our understanding of objects became more nuanced.” This position, which I would argue parrots a characteristically process-oriented pedagogical assumption, is, as Reed Way Dasenbrock points out, a fairly incoherent position. In “Do We Write the Text We Read,” Dasenbrock examines the implications of Davidson’s thinking on literary theory, especially as it pertains to Stanley’s Fish’s notion of interpretive communities. Fish’s explanation of interpretive communities is similar to the response given by the collaboratives above. Communities, when confronted with discursive problems – what does something mean – will adapt and adjust their understandings until they share the same belief about a particular object. However, since meaning is shaped *a priori*, it is part of and influenced by the interpretive community’s interpretation of texts. According to Fish’s notion of interpretive communities, different interpretations signal different community memberships, while shared meaning implies the power of the community to create and sustain beliefs about texts. Or, as Jonathan Culler points out, for Fish an interpretive community “creates everything but learns nothing” (72). Fish’s theory assumes, like most

of contemporary theory, that texts can only be understood “on our own terms,” which necessarily implies “that the text cannot be understood and at the same time be understood to be different from us” (Dasenbrock 32). Therefore, as Dasenbrock concludes, appeals to conceptual schemes like interpretive communities do not allow interlocutors to learn from experience. That is, from the perspective of social constructionist like Fish, *The Collaborative Notebook* assignment can only track the journey toward communal membership or disassociation – there is no way for objects and others to maintain their full weight.

Interactionism, however, allows for a much different interpretation of why meaning changes over time: objects and others *are different*. Our shared meanings are temporally bound, mutable, and collaborative. Moreover, every discursive encounter is novel to a certain extent; time, place, and conditions (including the emotional and cognitive conditions of the others with whom we discourse) change constantly. However, this does not mean that the meanings we share are always novel. As Davidson’s notion of *prior theories* tells us, we develop particular stances toward situations, we are prepared to move forward discursively in certain ways; therefore when the objects and others with whom we discourse put up little resistance to our discursive moves, shared meaning is easier to come by. *The Collaborative Notebook*, therefore, is attempt on my part to help students explore the importance of locality and time to the production of discursive identification via pragmatic empathy. The hope, then, is that this assignment will help students understand that discourse assumes the meaning of objects will continue to

change, but these changes will be clear as long as we continue to discourse with each other.

The Other, The Object, and Discursive Reflexivity

Time and place influence the conditions within which objects and interlocutors triangulate, but understanding the environmental and temporal conditions of discourse cannot provide an answer to the question, *with whom can interlocutors experience pragmatic empathy and share meaning?* To answer this question requires an understanding of the difference between what Donna Qualley and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater call reflexivity and what I call *discursive reflexivity*. In articulating the difference the pedagogical implications become clear: pragmatic empathy *does not arise in the process of non-discursive reflexive inquiry*. That is, pragmatic empathy is limited to those moments of triangulation when a speaker responds to objects *and (an)other* in the shared world.

In their essay “Collaboration as Reflexive Dialogue: A Knowing ‘Deeper Than Reason,’” Qualley and Chiseri-Strater build upon Kurt Spellmeyer’s argument for dialogic composition pedagogies. For Qualley and Chiseri-Strater, dialogic pedagogies are necessarily collaborative and involve “two recursive moves: dialectic encounter with another (a person or idea) and a reflexive engagement with the self” (111). Recursivity, the turning back to the self in response to an external stimulus, is central to the interactionist approach to discourse that I am arguing for in this project. As Davidson’s

theory of triangulation clearly demonstrates, shared meaning explicitly involves the turning back to the self in an attempt to adjust discourse in order to direct (an)other's attention to an object of common cause. However, reflexivity, as defined by Qualley and Chiseri-Strater, is only part of the triangulation process that leads to passing theories. Reflexivity, in Qualley and Chiseri-Strater's view, is non-discursive; it does not include all three apexes of the triangle—at least two interlocutors and an object of common cause.

In her monograph, *Turns of Thought*, Donna Qualley distinguishes reflexivity from the related term reflection. Reflection, Qualley contends, names the process of accessing the contents of the mind “*independently of others*” (11). When a person reflects the goal is to determine cognitively, without dialogic encounters with the other, the answers to problems. We reflect to know more about what we think we know about ourselves. That is, the process arises, exists, and comes to an end within the interiority of the subject. Reflexivity on the other hand, “does not originate in the self but always occurs in response to a person's critical engagement with an ‘other’” (12). Qualley argues that these encounters with others provide new perspectives that “we must hold up to our current conception of things,” and in doing so, “The juxtaposition of two different representations often reveals their ill fit. In order to make sense, we are compelled to identify and examine our own underlying assumptions” (12). In the end, Qualley believes that “Reflexivity enables us to look at the implications of our linkages and to take responsibility for our judgments” (156). As I noted earlier, I am in agreement with Qualley and Chiseri-Strater that reflexivity, changing our discursive actions as a result of

encounters with others *and objects* is essential to an interactionist account of discourse; however, I want to suggest that reflexivity can either be non-discursive (the type Qualley and Chiseri-Strater describe) or discursive (reflexivity as a constitutive element of discursive triangulation). This difference derives from our differing views of the term “other.”

For Qualley and Chiseri-Strater, the “other” can be both person and idea. This understanding of other is the prevalent view and derives from the postmodern notion that “nothing is not a text.” Everything, which includes artifacts and individuals, requires interpretation, or “reading.” Thus, the guiding assumption for Qualley and Chiseri-Strater is that an “other” provides the impetus for change because often our “readings” of the world meet resistance from the others we attempt to read. Therefore, these moments of resistance, if we choose to allow them, can help an individual change their thinking about the world. For Davidson, Yarbrough, and myself, however, the “other” is a person whereas an idea, concept, or material artifact is an object. That is to say, Qualley argues that both people and things can be read and responded to in the same fashion – as others. From my perspective, though, interlocutors sharing conceptions about an object under particular conditions defines communication. Therefore our discursive interaction with others varies from our discursive interactions with objects. They must because without being able to recognize others as different from objects, we would never be able to identify the points of triangulation.

In suggesting that Qualley presents a definition of non-discursive reflexivity, I am drawing upon the pragmatism of George Herbert Mead and Yarbrough’s adaption of his

ideas for use in rhetorical study. Mead, in *The Philosophy of the Act*, distinguishes between our interactions with sentient beings and non-sentient objects. This distinction, as Yarbrough has pointed out, is crucial because in Mead's work we find the first "non-metaphysical explanation of how communication is possible" (*Inventive* 18). For Mead, interactions with other sentient beings depend upon the recursive process of responding to the other's response to our gestures. In short, we know the importance of our actions because of the responses they elicit from others. Of course, because we share the world with others as well as objects, we also interact with non-sentient objects – objects that do not respond to our actions. Mead makes this point clear when he discusses the possible responses a person may choose when he notices the oncoming storm. The person will necessarily respond to the storm in some fashion, whether he retreats or enjoys the shower is inconsequential. Regardless of the person's actions, his gestures will have no impact on the actions of the storm. That is to say, "Noticing the signs of weather takes pragmatic precedence over noticing my own responses to them" (17). "Reactions toward weather conditions," Mead summarizes, "has no influence upon the weather itself" (*Selected Writings* 131).

It is the distinction that Mead draws between other discursive beings – those with whom we share the recursive process of discourse – and non-discursive objects that provides the foundation for a causal understanding of discourse. Yarbrough, more so than

Davidson, summarizes this view well when he writes:

This distinction between the ways we interpret non-interlocutive beings and interlocutive beings makes possible the coordination of interaction between interlocutive beings with respect to other objects of common attention by means of the dialogic process that a “conflict of actions initiates.” (18)

In other words, because *there is a difference* between objects and others, interlocutors can claim to share meaning with the other because they are able to determine if they are interacting with the same objects in the world. When we assume that our interactions with (an)other are the same as are interactions with objects, the emphasis is necessarily placed on the interpretation: Did I locate the other’s intended meaning when interpreting their discourse? However, in the interactionist model of discourse, the emphasis of communication is not placed on interpretation but interaction; rather, interpretation is simply an implied phase of discourse because “meaning is necessarily recursive, residing in the actual effect of a discursive act upon another being, and the effect of that same act upon oneself” (18).

Mead and Yarbrough, then, provide a definition of discursive reflexivity, *the recursive nature of discourse that involves the continual reshaping of utterances in response to (an)other’s response to their partners actions toward a common object*. Discursive reflexivity, then, represents a function of pragmatic empathy. Non-discursive reflexivity, however, leads exactly to the same problem discussed in chapter three– to claim that we respond reflexively to the other (objects and people), is no different than claiming I respond to the other *through particular conceptual schemes*, and if I respond to others through conceptual schemes, I do not allow others to retain their full weight,

and I have no way to claim that the meaning I impose on the other is objective, rationale, or fair. At best, and I believe it is fair to say that Qualley wants the best for people, a non-discursive reflexivity helps inform *prior theories*; that is, non-discursive reflexivity provides a means by which we are able to speculate about the commitments we intend to hold when confronted with future discursive situations.

However, commitments, as discussed earlier, are speculative and necessarily refined and changed as a result of interactions with the other and objects in a shared world. This refrain, “others and objects in a shared world” is crucial to understand because it provides the basis for any pedagogy seeking to investigate the role pragmatic empathy plays in creating discursive identifications. There is perhaps no better place to see the value of this refrain than when examining the reading habits of a composition classroom.

Pragmatic Empathy, Triangulation and How to Read

As Thomas Kent points out in “Paralogic Hermeneutics and the Possibilities of Rhetoric,” the standard practices within the composition classroom might be understood as “case-study” approaches to learning. In these models the students read and write about texts with the hope that their prose sufficiently demonstrates both appropriate use of language and accurate interpretation. “We assume,” Kent writes, referring to composition instructors, “that the writer can discover, in some predictable way, what it is she wants to say and how to say it” (36). As interactionism has shown us, however, such predictability

is impossible – discursive interactions are unique, temporally bound, and seldom repeated. Thus, as I argue, the goal of a first-year composition course should be to help students explicitly monitor their discursive exchanges with others as they use marks, noises, and gestures to direct each other's attention toward objects of common cause. In other words, I want students to experience the locality of discourse, the temporality of discourse, and the recursive nature of discourse. But, to accomplish these goals, “the student needs an object for her discourse”: students need to discourse in particular contexts with others and particular objects so that they can determine how their conceptions of objects differ and how they might go about identifying and responding to those distinctions.

Whether its the work of a well known writer, or the essay of a first-year student, reading presents the greatest challenge to an interactionist pedagogy because the prevailing assumptions guiding how we understand reading are so historically entrenched. Broadly, reading is currently understood in much the way Qualley describes, a single reader's interaction with a text. And, because Qualley, like Bizzell, Bruffee, Fish, Jarrett, Olson, and others, view both objects and others as “texts,” even “group discussions” are individual exercises: the individual “reads” the “responses” of others and changes her thinking according to her understanding of those responses. Therefore, when reading texts that deal with the experiences of the postcolonial other, or the marginalized other, the “reader,” at least from the popular view of reading, cannot ever move beyond him or herself to share meaning with others. Readers can only aim to make idiosyncratic adjustments to their thinking. In this case-study approach to reading, the goal remains

proper interpretation – locating what a text *really means* and thereby falling into the same trap of conceptual relativism: How is it possible to move beyond the interior and the personal and claim to share meaning with the other?

Interactionism provides an answer by suggesting that interlocutors share meaning when they invent collaboratively. Therefore, when interlocutors engage in the “reading of a text,” this names a collaborative endeavor in which the object of discourse is the text at hand. When understood as a non-discursive reflexive process, reading lacks the triangulating features that define interactionism. Reed Way Dasenbrock makes this point clear in his critique of Stanley Fish’s interpretive communities. From Fish’s social constructionist perspective, the text with which interlocutors engage can never be a distinct object. Since interpretations always already exist as a result of the interpretive community, readers cannot “assign any otherness to the text itself, for it is always something we possess and have written according to our beliefs,” beliefs which stem from our membership in particular discourse communities (31). The problem, then, is not simply that social constructionists cannot explain how we discourse with the other without reducing their discourse to a version of our own or that from this perspective there is no “difference between the us [readers] and the text;” no, “the more serious problem is that this inconsistency trivializes the study of literature by denying us any productive encounter with difference” (31). As Mead shows us, interacting with the other in regard to a particular object allows for people to retain their “full weight” and provides opportunity to engage real difference, difference beyond our internal cognition, because we respond to an object that exists in the shared world. Therefore, to engage difference,

from the perspective of interactionism, names the process by which interlocutors direct their partners attention to objects *differently*, thereby allowing the other to notice something different – *the object as conceived and interacted with through (an)other's discourse*.

For triangulation to occur readers need to locate the apexes of the discursive triangle. Locating these points, however, is impossible if readers continue to believe that the “other” names both the object of discourse and the actual others with whom we discourse. If we cannot locate the points of triangulation then the objects of our discourse cannot resist our readings. The problem, as Yarbrough sees it, is that too often texts are seen as artifacts of previous discourses. Texts, then, are read as *the consequence of prior exigencies*; to interpret a text is to locate the cultural, historical, and social conditions that brought it into fruition. As Yarbrough points out, this view of reading “effectively eliminates the third leg of Davidson’s triangle, the object with which interlocutors must interact” because interlocutors instead focus on the “*other’s means of interacting with us...as if these were an object*” (*Inventive* 157). That is, rather than focusing on the objects of the author’s discourse—what the author writes about—interlocutors instead focus their discursive attention upon the text *as an object itself*, upon the ways *in which the other went about describing the world’s objects*. Instead of using their marks, noises, and gestures to determine the relevant relationships between each other and their shared world, interlocutors direct their marks, noises, and gestures toward the other’s marks, noises and gestures, which diverts “our attention from the actual objects of the discourse in question, preventing us from understanding it” (157). When reading is understood as

locating the proper meaning of the text, regardless if “proper meaning” is understood as a close-reading in the vein of formalism or locating the intersecting social and cultural practices that shape a person’s discourse, as is the view of social constructionists, interlocutors cannot share meaning because there are no objects to resist their readings – resistance which would be evidenced in the other’s interactions with the same objects.

This complicated theoretical summary plays out over and over again in the composition classroom. Take for example peer review. Students are asked to produce a text. This text’s expressed purpose is to complete the demands of the assignment. The student-writer produces this text and brings it to her peers for peer review. For the most part peer review draws its theoretical framing from Stephen North’s notion that teachers and critics should aim to “make better writers, not better papers.” Therefore, peer review discussions often focus on *how the writer performed the task* but not on *whether the essay successfully gesticulates the object of discourse made relevant by the questions posed in the assignment*. Does the essay produced interact as expected within the context of the assignment? Answering this question is further complicated by the fact that student’s assume that the production of a text (any text, regardless of form) in response to the provocation of an assignment necessarily meets the demands set forth in the instructions. Simply put, from the students’ perspectives, there is always only one assignment: write something after you receive (or infer) directions from the instructor.

This statement should not be read as an indictment of student writing, but rather as an encouragement to instructors to create assignments that allow students to triangulate, which require assignments that allow students to respond to *objects of*

discursive situations. When given assignments like the popular, “write about an educational experience that shaped your life in some fashion, and remember this experience does not have to be something experienced in the classroom,” students tend to respond by producing texts that they believe answers the question posed by the assignment. Then, when asked to review the work of their peers, the responses students give each other tend to focus on how the writer wrote, “I like when you did x ,” or “I think you should have said x like y .” In both cases, the object of study is *the writer’s discourse*, but not the *intended object of the discourse*, the student essay. Simply put, students cannot triangulate because in this example, as with most assignments, there is no object to study, which is to say—interlocutors are not invested in the objects of the other’s discourse. Students, quite pragmatically, recognize that another’s essay is just that, someone else’s work, which has little material effect on their lives; therefore, peer responses are quite often unhelpful because student’s responses do not represent attempts to share meaning of an object of common cause. There is no common cause. For the most part, student’s are right when they assume the object (student essay) is important only to the student writer and perhaps the instructor, but these objects create no particular exigencies for (an)other.

The implication here is fairly clear. In most reading and writing assignments students are not asked to engage actual discursive exigencies, those situations where the problems needing to be solved through discourse are shared among interlocutors. To accomplish this, however, requires assignments and practices that allow students to participate in contexts that require attention to be paid to objects. So, we might rewrite

the assignment above in the following way as a means to create an actual discursive situation. The new assignment might read something like this, “You and your collaborative are the board of trustees for a small liberal arts college and assigned the task of determining which extra-curricular activities should continue to receive funding. Write a short essay that describes an important educational experience that occurred outside of the classroom. Use this essay as departure point for your collaborative’s discussion about the programs you will choose to keep.” In structuring the assignment in this fashion, the student now writes under particular environmental conditions; moreover, the object of discourse – what programs to keep – represents something that can be resisted by others in the collaborative. That is, “what to keep” is an object that carries with it a number of conceptions, and only through triangulation will students be able to create the meaning they wish to share about the object of common cause.

Some Final Considerations

In the end, I am sympathetic to Kenneth Burke’s desire to articulate how rhetoric aids in the project of shared meaning. In truth, my sympathy stems in part from my admiration for his work, and how, given the constraints of structuralist and poststructuralist thinking, Burke tried but could not articulate a description of identification that moved beyond the “skeptic’s question” and allowed others to maintain their “full-weight.” Discursive identification via pragmatic empathy, as I have argued in this study, provides a description of shared meaning that both answers the skeptic and

allows the other to be (an)other – an individual with whom we do not have to share our language, culture, or history before we can share meaning about objects in the world.

I conclude this study by returning to the initial argument of this chapter, if discourse is how we get around in the world, then *pedagogies* about discourse are irrelevant. Discourse *is epistemological*—how we know, is how we know, and like everything else we learn how to discourse through inference, experience, and from others to whom we attribute wisdom. Thus, the epistemological implications of discursive interactionism are also the pedagogical implications: to learn *how to discourse is to discourse with an awareness of our choices*.

An interactionist pedagogy requires a classroom setting that encourages, promotes, and continually practices collaboration. In emphasizing collaboration, instructors would also need to highlight the importance of location and time to meaning making, a quality that requires students to understand the difference between non-discursive reflexivity and discursive reflexivity. And, in order to understand any of these qualities requires assignments and exercises that place student writers in specific contexts with specific objects of discourse. In focusing on the centrality of location, time, and context, an interactionist approach to discourse studies lends itself nicely to the concerns of Writing in the Disciplines (WID) and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) initiatives gaining ground in many universities. WAC and WID initiatives provide students the opportunity to direct their discursive efforts toward specific objects in specific contexts. These initiatives assume that writing is the answer to specific problems. As teachers of rhetoric and composition we are best prepared, given our experiences with

discourse, to take the lead in these initiative areas. What Davidson, Kent, Yarbrough, and others provide rhetoric and composition is a means to argue for the continued value of studying discourse. As the world becomes more globalized, the local context will become increasingly diverse, and thereby communication more complicated. In order to meet these challenges we need a theory that both allows for difference, and provides a description of how we share meaning without sharing conceptual schemes, like languages, cultures, or histories. An interactionist approach to discourse studies provides the answers to these questions.

While I am in support of providing a theoretical approach to communication that will keep me gainfully employed, the goal of this project is much more simple – how can we share meaning with another person without eliminating difference? The answer, I conclude, begins with understanding pragmatic empathy as interactionism's methodological imperative. Pragmatic empathy, as I have argued, is limited—bound by time, space, and the conditions under which we discourse. I am committed that in order to engage the exigencies of a globalized world we must abandon the prevailing sentiment that we can somehow empathize with the absent other, that we can create rhetorical identifications without objects upon which to direct the other's attention, and that we can share meaning without accounting for the conditions under which our discourse occurs. Intersubjectivity emerges through triangulation and implies collaboration with others. This is not say the study of others and the environmental conditions that shape their discourse is without merit; but it is to say that this work is speculative, that is, subjective—the perspectives drawn from these types of study are necessarily

idiosyncratic. To arrive at truth, as Davidson tells us, requires intersubjectivity, the experience of sharing objects with others. In the end, I hope pragmatic empathy contributes to the projects begun by Jeremy Rifkin and neuroscientists like Marco Iaconbani by providing a useable rhetorical theory of empathy.

I am committed to the notion that ultimately what we know is what we share with others. What we share emerges as we discourse, a local and temporally bound process that emphasizes the delicate and passing nature of shared meaning. This is not a grand theory; rather, pragmatic empathy is a simple approach to discourse—it neither requires an omnipotent understanding of the other nor a belief that interlocutors need to use marks, noises, and gestures in the same way in order to communicate. Discourse begins where causes converge, where the discursive problems that inflict others impinge upon us, and pragmatic empathy emerges as we share those problems with each other. As this theory suggests, differences between interlocutors remain because triangulation provides a non-metaphysical description of discourse—what we know and what we share with others emerges through interactions with objects, a process that does not rely on appeals to pre-discursive identification or the sharing of conceptual schemes. Pragmatic empathy as a methodology demands little of us as interlocutors— we approach discursive interactions as we are, without presuppositions or shared histories but with a willingness to believe the other has done the same.

There is nothing we must share with (an)other in order to empathize, save, the world.

NOTES

1. Donald Davidson shares a similar sentiment. The following is a remark made while being interviewed by Thomas Kent. “Understanding other cultures is no different from understanding our next door neighbor, except in degree. Its not a difference in kind” (Kent, “Language Philosophy” 12).

2. Similarly, critical pedagogies working with the ideas of Paulo Freire often become too determined to illustrate how American university students are like the poor farmers with who Freire established his cultural circles. As Ronald and Roskelly point out, however, these are problems of application not problems of Freire’s thinking (“Untested”).

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APPENDIX A

Collaborative Notebook | A Journey Through Texts

The collaborative notebook is both a product and a process. The final product will be turned in at the end of the semester before your final group presentation. The following document describes both the practices we will engage on Wednesdays in our collaboratives and the final product that is being produced.

The Notebook

As a group you need to find a **notebook/binder** to collect all of the materials you will gather. I would suggest at least a 2"three-ring binder. Next, your group will need to divide the notebook into three sections, which can be easily done using dividers. The three sections are **Artifacts, Attendance, and Notes**. I will explain each of these categories in more detail on Monday. The most important thing to keep in mind is this: The notebook will be graded, in part, on the breadth and scope of the artifacts you collect and on the quality of its organization.

Wednesday: Collaborative Practices

The goal of these collaboratives is to create a thoughtful and intelligent presentation for the end of the semester, and to engage in a reflective inquiry that addresses the following questions: How do we work together? How do disagreements affect the function of a group?; Is it possible that collaboration is messier, but delivers better thinking and writing? To answer these questions we will keep a record of our Wednesday meetings. These notes will be used at the end of the semester when you meet with John and discuss your experiences in these collaborative groups. Along with taking copious notes, each member of the group will fulfill a different role on Wednesdays, and by the end of the semester you should have completed each role at least twice. A description of each role follows:

Chairperson

The chairperson's responsibility is to make sure each member of the group is completing their particular task for that day. The chairperson is also responsible for making sure each person has the opportunity to listen and speak. During the course of a class, I may ask your group how collaboration is proceeding – my expectation is that the chairperson for that given day will be able to explain your group's project and progress at that particular moment.

Secretary of the Collaborative

The secretary's responsibility is to take clear, concise, and thorough notes regarding the day's proceedings. The secretary should focus his or her attention on the conversations taking place and the discussions concerning the artifacts presented to the group. The secretary should see their job as trying to paint a clear picture of the group's interactions, so that if I were to examine the notes taken on a particular day I would be able to get a sense of what took place.

Historian/Fact Finder

The role of the historian/fact finder is to make connections between the artifacts. The historian needs to be an active participant in the group's discussion so he or she can make connections between the current discussion and the notes and artifacts from previous meetings. This role is crucial, especially early in the process, because locating connections will help the collaborative find a direction for their project.

Ethnographer

The role of the ethnographer is to **listen and observe**. The ethnographer's work is difficult, but will be incredibly rewarding when the project comes to an end. There will be a separate handout for this position, but for the sake of summary I will say that the ethnographer's job is to help us define the following question: What makes our collaborative a group? By analyzing the ethnographer's notes we can begin to locate habits, features, and traits that might help define your group as such.